

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 1

Miya Kinojo

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Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

Chillin' in Another World

WITH W2

SUPER CHEAT POWERS

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Chapter 1: The Hero Candidate

In the castle town of Paluma—the Royal Capital—the market workers' carts were lined up in the loading area as they were every day, either carrying goods to the wholesalers or gathering up purchased merchandise. This was the great metropolis that stood at the continent's center, bringing unity across all lands. Here, the traffic of countless people and wagons continued day and night in the hopes that the city might continue to prosper.

Demihumans were rare, as the church of Böbelbaum and their doctrine of human supremacy enjoyed great patronage in the city. Most demihumans ended up as slaves, while the rest made a meager living out of sight in the back streets. It was a far cry from the distant frontier, where humans were a rare sight.

Banaza of the Spade Mercantile Association was busily making his usual rounds in the loading area. He was simultaneously directing the workers packing merchandise meant for their carts, and overseeing the work of loading and unloading the carts that had just arrived from the frontier. It was a great volume of merchandise that could only be expected of a large company like the Spade Association, but Banaza made it look easy.

Banaza was born and raised in the Royal Capital. He had always excelled at arithmetic, so much so that even as a youth in the lower grades of his school, he had grown famous throughout the city. Indeed, he was taken on by the Spade Association the instant he graduated. He proved more than just a mathematical mind, however, developing great business sense. He was both a merciless negotiator with flawless prowess of discernment for goods on sale, and a person who, by nature, could relate to anyone without discrimination. Not only did his superiors in the Association think of him favorably, but even people in rival firms took a liking to him. He was a true rarity.

As if that wasn't enough, Banaza was blessed with a face so beautiful that many would take him to be a woman at first glance, as well as with an attractively proportioned body. There were many women who harbored amorous feelings for him, but he always put work above their invitations, staying late every day, laboring ceaselessly. To put it simply: he just enjoyed his job.

In one of the groups loading freight into the cart, there was a kijin in black armor. When he caught sight of Banaza, he called out, "Hey

Banaza, how many more boxes are we loading?"

"Ah, Mister Kuro. Fine work," Banaza replied, still looking over his papers. "Oh, would you load one more stack of five boxes over there? And, depending on how the sales talks go, we might need you to load four or five more. I'm very sorry, but could I ask you to wait for us while you take your lunch break?"

As he said this, Banaza took a gold coin from the bag on his waist and handed it over to Kuro. The merchants all started to gossip at once.

"Look at that! Is he giving money to a demihuman?"

"Like it isn't bad enough that we have to see those *things* walking around in broad daylight."

"Honestly! There's gotta be something wrong with him."

As the people around them whispered on, Kuro lowered his head, distressed. "Banaza, it's not like I don't appreciate it but...I'm a kijin, you know? A demihuman. You really shouldn't be so polite."

But Banaza smiled calmly at Kuro and forced the coin into his hand. "And what difference does that make? I'd only be bothered if you didn't let me do at least this much. Do you think I want my partner in this exchange to do everything just because it's convenient for *me*?"

This didn't seem to satisfy Kuro. "Um, well, but..."

Just then, a female merchant walked up to the two of them, smiling. "Mister Kuro, you should know full well that Mister Banaza will never change his mind once he's made a decision," she said. "Just nod your head and go get some food at the Five Dragons or somewhere with the rest of the caravan."

"R-Really? Well if you say so, Quinn, I guess I can't refuse Banaza's kindness. He really does treat us well..." Kuro turned towards his team. "Hey, you lot! Lunch is on Banaza today! Say thank you nice and proper, and follow me!"

Laughing with a mighty "Gah ha ha," Kuro walked off towards the other side of the road. The rest of his team of kijin all stopped working the carts at once, and came over to thank Banaza before hurrying across the street after Kuro.

"Thanks for everything, Mister Banaza."

"Thanks for the grub!"

"I owe you one!"

Banaza saw them off with a smile, and then turned to look at the merchant standing next to him, who went by the name of Quinn. The only daughter of the president of the small mercantile firm Quinn Company, Quinn had already completely taken over management of the company's procurement at her young age. Like Banaza, despite being born and raised in the Royal Capital, she associated freely with

demihumans without prejudice. Indeed, she attracted a great deal of scrutiny for her habits, such as her practice of hiring only kobolds to be her subordinates. She was good-natured and beautiful, with an excellent figure, but even so it was not uncommon to hear words of ridicule such as, “Are Quinn and Banaza dating? They’re both strange, after all.” Quinn paid them no mind.

“That was a big help. I’ll have to thank you properly at some point, Quinn,” said Banaza with a calm smile, pressing his palms together.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, grinning back. “It was nothing.”

The people around them were whispering to each other, not hiding the distance they seemed so desperate to keep. The two of them both faced odd looks and scorn for refusing to discriminate against demihumans: Banaza, who spoke to them so easily, and Quinn, who hired them not as slaves, but as full employees.

Banaza turned, glancing at the crowd, his smile now looking forced. “I don’t see what’s so strange about treating demihumans with respect.”

“I don’t think there are many humans in the Royal Capital who would say that,” Quinn replied, the same strained smile on her face. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the two of us were the only ones in this whole market.”

“I hope, one day, maybe... One day, it won’t matter if someone is a human or a demihuman. One day, we’ll see a world where all people are treated as equals.” Banaza looked to the sky, a slight wistful look in his eyes.

Quinn, too, turned her gaze upward. “Yes,” she said, with a hint of humor. “And it’s not going to happen unless we—the younger generation—make it happen... So, where shall we start?”

Banaza fixed his gaze intently on Quinn. “Yes... What can we do...” Even as he said that, something about the palms of his own hands caught his eye. Something strange was happening. “What...?”

His hands looked like they were glowing. Was he imagining things? He blinked his eyes, and looked again. The light had spread, suddenly enveloping his whole body. “What? What?!”

Just as suddenly, the light vanished, taking Banaza with it.

“Oh, by the way Banaza,” Quinn said, turning her gaze bashfully to where Banaza had been, “next time...”

But Banaza wasn’t there.

“Banaza?”

Puzzled, Quinn scanned the area. There was no sign of him anywhere. She called out for him again. “Banaza?”

But there was no response.

“The 198th Hero candidate summoning is a success.”

...Excuse me?

Banaza didn't recognize the voice he heard. He began to open his eyes, and then widened them in shock. He should have been in the loading area packed with carts. He was just there, working, chatting amicably with his friend Quinn. But instead he saw an enormous room, one that looked to him like some sort of church. Banaza was standing somewhere near the middle. Around him were many women who looked like witches. They were chanting, and at their words a great magic circle slowly revolved around Banaza's feet. (By the way, magic users in this world were referred to by different terms depending on their gender. Men were called magi, and women, witches. The exception was those who had reached the utmost pinnacle of magic—they were permitted to use the title of Grand Magus, regardless of gender.)

Wh-What in the world...? Where am I?

Completely disoriented by his new surroundings, Banaza stood still in shock. A woman dressed in maid-like attire came up to him and curtsied gracefully.

“Welcome to our world, Milord Hero Candidate. Would you be so kind as to come with me?” She gestured with her right hand, beckoning him to step forward, but Banaza did not move. Not understanding that the woman's words were meant for him, he continued to stand motionless.

Banaza was in the middle of what he took to be an altar. All around him, people who looked like priests and magi continued to chant, casting some kind of spell. The altar was set in the middle of a larger building. With only the sunlight filtering in through the stained glass windows for illumination, Banaza could not see all the way to the end of the room.

“Milord Hero Candidate, it is almost time for the next candidate to be summoned. Please hurry, and come with us.” The maid took his hand—he was still looking around the room, dazed—and pulled him down from the magic circle. She then turned again to face him properly, and gave a respectful bow.

“Milord Hero Candidate. We, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, humbly thank you for answering our summons. I apologize for the inconvenience, but please allow us to perform an evaluation of your abilities.”

I “answered their summons”?

The maid's words only made Banaza more bewildered. She smiled sympathetically. “I can tell you're confused. That's perfectly

understandable. I know this is all very sudden. If you will accompany us to the Crystal Chamber, I will give a short explanation of our situation as we walk.”

As she led him away, she began to elucidate. “The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode is a nation in a world other than the one you hail from. We are a great kingdom in the middle of the world, boasting the largest domain of any nation. Our kingdom has formed pacts with many of the smaller countries, and governs the affairs of our world as the head of an alliance.”

They came to a turn in the corridor, and the maid led Banaza ahead. He followed behind, taking stock of his surroundings as he listened to the maid’s speech. He had visited the royal castle in Paluma due to his work from time to time, but the difference between that castle and the one he was now walking through was like night and day.

I can hardly believe it. This maid must be telling the truth—I must really be in another world.

He followed after the woman, nervous sweat on his brow. She continued:

“Under the guidance of Klyrode, our world enjoyed many years of harmony... But then the Dark One came and took those peaceful days from us.” She lowered her head as she spoke. “Long ago, the Dark One was vanquished by the Hero of Legend, leaving none to succeed him. It was thought that the line of Dark Ones had died off. But now... Now, the Dark One has suddenly reappeared, in all his terrible strength. He declared his intention to conquer the world, and launched a massive invasion. The Dark Army is very powerful, you see—it has trampled through cities all over the country in no time at all. To overcome this invasion, we of Klyrode invoked a spell passed down to us from ancient times to summon worthy heroes from other worlds to oppose him.”

“Excuse me,” Banaza interrupted, “I don’t quite understand. Ancient magic or no, why would you summon people from other worlds? Wouldn’t it be better to send your own kingdom’s knights, adventurers, heroes, or what have you? You would know their strength better; surely they must be more reliable...”

The maid nodded her head. “Well, according to the ancient legends, almost everyone summoned from another world carries the blessing of the gods of the Celestial Plane. This blessing, the Divine Revelation, gives them strength that no ordinary human could match, even if they trained for a thousand years. It will give us a hero much stronger than any we could marshal from the fighters of our own world.”

“Indeed, the hero summoned to this land to defeat the Dark One a

hundred years ago came with extraordinary ability scores even at Level 1, with a score of 999 in all five of the major categories: Strength, Defense, Speed, Magic, and HP—and was equipped with many powerful skills.”

According to the maid, an average ability score for a person in this world was 10, a number that would increase as they gained levels. For someone to have 999 in all abilities at Level 1 was so rare that it could only be called a miracle. Furthermore, when someone leveled up, it was typical for the increase in their ability scores to be more significant the higher their base scores. The last Hero of Legend had reached scores so high they could no longer be calculated by the time they were Level 48.

As they stepped into the room, Banaza met the woman’s eyes, distressed. “I see,” he said, “but then, why would you summon me? I’m only a merchant. I do somewhat know how to use a sword, but I’m not enough of a fighter to take on a beast or anything... I must have been summoned by mistake. I’m no hero.”

The woman smiled. “I believe you do not know the power you possess. It’s not uncommon. It is said that the former Hero of Legend was originally a failed soldier.”

“Now, let us take the measure of your abilities,” she said, directing him onward. “Lord Banaza, please hold your hand to the crystal.”

Where the maid was pointing there was a platform, coming about to Banaza’s waist in height. On top of it, a blue crystal shone with divine light. “Like...this?” Hesitantly, Banaza reached towards the crystal. The maid bowed respectfully to Banaza, and went to peer into the depths of the crystal.

“This can’t...” The maid blinked in surprise, stepping back from the crystal and rubbing her eyes before taking a second look into the crystal. “Wh-What is the meaning of this?!” Her shoulders trembling, she covered her mouth in an unconscious gesture, completely at a loss for words.

Copying her, Banaza looked into the crystal while holding his own hand to it. Inside, he saw lines of letters and numbers, and understood the reason behind the maid’s speechlessness:

Lv: 1

Strength: 9

Defense: 8

Speed: 6

Magic: 1

HP: 10

Skills: Arithmetic, Business Sense

If he understood the maid's explanation correctly, the ability scores reflected here would be utterly typical for an average person in this world. His skills, too, must have been what he had originally brought with him from his world, not anything granted from the gods as Divine Revelation for the summoned hero.

"No trace of Divine Revelation... It can't be... I've never heard of something like this. This...isn't supposed to happen!" The maid looked like she couldn't believe her eyes. Noticing her reaction, two women in the same maid uniform as her, and two in witch-like garb gathered around them to check his scores for themselves. They were visibly distraught. Before he knew it, Banaza was surrounded by a small, gossip crowd talking in quiet voices.

"A failure... We must send him back to his world."

"No, we should investigate further. It's uncanny for there to be no evidence of the blessing whatsoever."

"But the gate is going to close..."

Suddenly, there was a voice from nearby. "Ah! Splendid! We have summoned one with power rivaling the Hero of Legends!"

Another person had entered the room, and had just finished holding his hand to the crystal. In front of him, a different woman in the same maid outfit was weeping joyfully.

"Is something wrong, Chihaya?" The maids surrounding Banaza rushed to gather around the other maid called Chihaya, and followed her gaze into the crystal.

The newcomer's ability scores were displayed:

Lv: 1

Strength: 999

Defense: 999

Speed: 999

Magic: 999

HP: 999

Skills: Pre-Mastery

Banaza recalled from the maid's speech that these were the same scores as the hero who was summoned a hundred years prior to defeat the Dark One. The man in front of the crystal certainly looked the part: with his chiseled physique and ornate armor, it was easy to imagine him as a knight of some faraway land. At the same time, he had fair looks that could captivate even a man's heart, with beautiful almond eyes and long golden hair.

"I see. Then this means that I have been chosen to save this world," said the man.

“It does! Please save us, O Hero!”

At some point, even the maid who had accompanied Banaza had rushed to the golden-haired knight’s side, celebrating out loud.

As rumors spread, more and more people entered the room. Each one would look at the knight’s ability scores, and then, without exception they would cry out in joy and weep with emotion. Soon, the room was full of people loudly celebrating the golden-haired knight. Banaza, who had been pushed into a corner by the wave of bodies, was watching out of the corner of his eye, still shaken.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

“Father, we must speak.”

A woman walked briskly into the throne room and knelt before King Klyrode, the master of the castle.

“What is it, Princess?” said the king. “I am quite busy, you know—I am meant to attend the feast celebrating the advent of a new hero.” He rose from his throne, but the princess took to her feet, rushing to the front of him and blocking his path.

“Would you at least reconsider sending more heroes after the Dark One? We’ve summoned nearly two hundred candidates and sent anyone with even a little promise on this mission. Not a single one has come back to us. To continue sending them off to pointlessly die would be—”

“And what do you mean, ‘pointless’?! You’ve heard the rumors that the Dark One is abdicating in favor of his son. One of the heroes we summoned *must* have defeated him. There’s no other explanation!”

“Perhaps, but friend or foe, there are also rumors of a demon uprising, angry with the atrocities committed by the former Dark One.”

“Oh, shut up!” Enraged, the king struck his daughter out of the way, knocking her off her feet. She fell to the floor with a cry. “They say the candidate this time has the same potential as the Hero of Legend!” the King spat, looking down at his daughter. “This one is *sure* to slay the Dark One or his son or whatever, and put an end to all these summonings.”

Having said his piece, he made for the back of the throne room, pausing to beckon one of his aides. “Instruct the witches to continue with the candidate summonings,” he said, pressing close to whisper in the aide’s ear.

“But... The hero this time is—”

“Don’t be an idiot. We can’t know for certain that this hero will defeat the Dark One either. Until we hear that the Dark One is dead, the summonings will continue. Understood?”

After a pause, the aide bowed his head and dashed off down the

hallway. The King watched him go, and then started off in the opposite direction. The princess peered at her father from her position on the floor, lying where she fell.

“Your Highness!”

One of the lady knights in the princess’s entourage rushed to her side to help her up, but the princess held up a hand, warding her off, and slowly pulled herself to her feet.

What now...? What must I do?

Hunching her shoulders, the princess departed from the throne room.

◇Klyrode Castle—Dignitary’s Hall◇

“Lord Hero, savior of the land, thank you for coming to the aid of our world!”

The king was facing the golden-haired knight sitting next to him, grinning so broadly it seemed to take up his entire face. They were in the castle room used for entertaining dignitaries, right at the center of a great banquet attended by the whole castle—the Feast of the Hero’s Advent. The king was seated at the same level as the new hero, drinking and drinking without stop, his spirits high.

Suddenly the king shot to his feet, holding drink number who-knows-how-many aloft, surveying the assembled crowd.

“Hear me! This golden-haired knight is hereby appointed the Hero of our world. Let all of us lend him our aid—not just those of Klyrode, but the whole Alliance!”

An enormous cheer met the king’s proclamation, threatening to bring the hall down on everyone’s heads.

“Long live the King!”

“Long live King Klyrode!”

“Long live the Hero!”

“Long live the Golden-Haired Hero!”

The cheers and toasts carried on as the golden-haired knight, newly appointed as Hero, stood smiling and waving to the crowd.

Banaza, meanwhile, was hiding in the corner.

He had been pushed out of the room by the crowd of people gathered around the golden-haired knight back in the Crystal Chamber. With no plan and no direction, he wandered around Klyrode Castle trying not to stand out, until he accidentally ended up lost in the crowd of banquet guests.

I guess this is some kind of feast... If they notice that I’m here, they’ll kick me out for sure.

Uncomfortably aware of the line of sight of the people around him, Banaza quietly approached a table lined with food, grabbed several plates, and hurried back to his corner. Sighing with relief, he

hid himself from sight and slowly took a bite of the food.

Oh, this is good stuff!

It was the first food Banaza had eaten since being summoned to the world, and he stuffed more and more into his mouth. Once his empty stomach was filled, he felt much calmer. He gradually resolved to at least take a look around the banquet.

“There’s so many people here. I bet I can learn *something*,” he muttered to himself. “Someone here might know how to get me back to my world...”

“Excuse me for a moment!” he said, trying to get the attention of a group of people nearby. He tried another, and then another, but everyone he spoke to brushed him off with a brusque response, such as “I’m quite busy welcoming the Hero, you know!” or “I have to speak with the Hero! Don’t bother me!”

The Feast of the Hero’s Advent continued on for three days and three nights. Fortunately for Banaza, the door was left unlocked the entire time, so he spent the days sleeping on a sofa in the corner. He kept trying time and time again to get someone’s attention, but nobody bothered to listen.

And then came the night of the third day. “Well then, everyone, let’s give our Golden-Haired Hero a big round of applause!” The king gave these final words and brought the banquet to a close. The guests started to leave, and before long, the staff began to clean up as well.

Banaza was sitting on the sofa like he had been for three days, when he caught sight of someone in a group of stragglers. His eyes went wide—it was the maid who had shown him to the Crystal Chamber on the first day. He hurried to her in a panic, catching her before she left the room. “E-Excuse me, can we talk?”

“Ah... Yes? What is it?” The maid stared blankly at him, confused.

“Do you remember me? I was the Hero candidate you summoned...”

“The...Hero candidate? It can’t be. You’re Lord Banaza?!” Her eyes shot open in recognition, her face losing color as the memory came back to her. “But, you... What are you still doing in this world?”

“Don’t ask me. Nobody’s told me anything...”

Somehow the maid’s face went even paler. For a while she just stared at him in shocked silence, both hands covering her mouth. And then, slowly, she spoke. “Summoning a Hero candidate is very difficult magic. It’s not at all uncommon for us to summon someone with low aptitude as a hero. Usually in such cases we send them back to their world within the day they’re summoned.” She paused for a moment, distressed. “Which is to say, the gates we use to summon you... They close within twenty-four hours. And once a gate is closed, finding the

same gate is supposed to be almost impossible...”

At the maid’s words, Banaza, too, was stunned into silence. It was the third day since he had been summoned to this world.

For a while, the two of them just stared at each other, at a complete loss.



Banaza was taken to a room in the castle, led by the maid from earlier. “Please, um, wait here. I’m going to talk to my superiors about this,” she had said, leaving him waiting for her to return. It was already around two in the morning.

What’s going to happen to me? Banaza thought, a tinge of fear on his face.

Eventually a group of witches entered the room, along with a man who seemed to be some kind of castle official. The man approached, and stood facing directly towards Banaza, while the witches lined up on either side of him. As they completed their formation, he began to speak. “Mister Banaza, was it? We of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode would like to express our deepest apologies for our grave error, and the enormous trouble it has caused you,” he said, and deeply lowered his head. The witches at his sides followed suit.

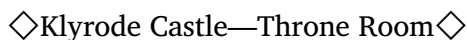
The official explained that Banaza had been deemed unfit as a hero candidate, and was meant to have been sent back to his world on the same day he arrived. However, due to the timing of the Golden-Haired Hero being summoned at almost the same time, the castle staff had all forgotten themselves in celebration of the arrival of a hero with the same abilities as the Hero of Legends, and completely neglected the issue of Banaza.

When the castle witches had received the maid’s report, he said, they searched as hard as they could for a way to return Banaza to his world. However, as there existed an infinite number of worlds, they were unable to locate a gate that led back to Banaza’s world, now that the one that brought him here had been closed.

“We had every witch in the castle looking...” said one of the witches standing next to the official, unable to make eye contact with Banaza.

“N-No...” Banaza stumbled. “Then... What’s going to happen to me?”

Banaza was so pale he looked almost devoid of life.



The next morning, Banaza was taken to the castle’s throne room. Before him sat King Klyrode on his throne, elevated a level above the

rest of the room. The king hadn't uttered a word since Banaza was brought into the room. Banaza lowered his head slightly, but the king gave no reaction, only regarding him with a steady gaze. His chin rested on his hand, and his right elbow was propped up on the armrest. Banaza thought he looked somehow displeased.

After some time, the king turned to the aide standing to his side, seeming to signal something with only a glance. The aide, who had been waiting his turn, stepped between Banaza and the king. He faced Banaza and lightly cleared his throat, opening a paper he held in his hands.

"To the Hero candidate Banaza who has visited us from another world, the words of the king," he began. "As concerns our failure to return you to your world, being deemed unfit as a Hero candidate, we acknowledge our error. This failure reflects on the whole of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, and we apologize with all our heart. Therefore, you shall be granted special permission to reside in this world. However, due to certain concerns, you are not to reside in the city. This permission only extends to the Delaveza Forest north of the castle. You may come and go from the city if you like, but you are strictly forbidden to speak about any of what has occurred."

"By way of restitution," he continued, "you will be granted an appropriate sum of money, as well as such items as are necessary for life. That is all."

As the aide finished, the king stood up from his throne and left. During the whole time he was there, not once did he show any contrition.

One woman stepped out from the row of people who had been waiting behind the king. She followed after him, saying, "Father!" Before she left the room, however, she turned back to look at Banaza and bowed her head deeply.

The aide placed the paper in his breast pocket. "There's a carriage waiting to take you to Delaveza Forest. They're arranging for your restitution to be given to you there. You will set out immediately." With that, he left the room by the same door the king had earlier. At least *he* had addressed Banaza directly.

The people lined up behind the king, too, followed after.

"What? Wait, hold on!" Banaza tried to get in front of the departing crowd, calling out in a panic. But not one of them seemed inclined to listen.

A guard walked into the room through the same door that Banaza had used to enter. "Lord Banaza," he said, "please come this way," indicating the door with his right hand. He rushed Banaza along, clearly wanting him to leave quickly. The whole affair had a strong atmosphere of coercion, but Banaza could do nothing but follow the

guard's instructions.



“Circumstances be as they may, Father, I believe that was far too cruel.”

The princess rushed after the king, who was walking down the hallway. At her words, he stopped in his tracks, glancing at her over his shoulder. “And what exactly did you think was so cruel, my eldest daughter? I went to the trouble of making a personal appearance to pass a decree to that wretch—that *failure* not even fit to be a hero candidate. Is that not altogether more than he deserves?”

The king looked forward and started again down the hall, but the princess walked up even closer to him, speaking urgently. “It was we who summoned him to our world, for our own purposes...and it's because of our mistake that he cannot return. Are you really not going to say a single word to him? Not show him any remorse? Is that kingly conduct?”

The king continued down the hallway, not sparing a glance in her direction.

“Furthermore, sending him to live in the Delaveza Forest is excessive. There have been reports for some time now of sightings of demons thought to be in the Dark Army. There are even rumors that they are constructing a forward base there. Sending him to live in such a place... Father, do you intend for that man to die?!”

At this, the king stopped. Slowly, he turned towards the princess, who also stopped in her tracks. He was smirking. “And what if I said yes. What then?”

“Father! You can't!”

Before her father's icy gaze, the princess was fixed to the spot, at a loss for words. With a glance back at her, the king once again continued down the hallway. The princess could only stare, dumbfounded.

“Your Majesty.” As the king left his daughter behind him, the aide who had read his pronouncement to Banaza caught up. He fell in place at the king's side, and continued on alongside him. “Arrangements have been made to see the man to a carriage bound for the Delaveza Forest.”

The king nodded slightly, only turning his eyes towards the aide. “And is his Bottomless Bag set with our little surprise?”

“Yes,” he said, grinning. “Everything is in order.”

A grin spread over the king's face as well. “If one is to vanquish a Dark One, there are certain unavoidable expenses, I suppose,” he said. “What a pity.” And he laughed, a self-assured “Wah ha ha ha ha!”

The laughter echoed through the halls, strange and uncanny.

Banaza had been led away by the guard, straight to the castle entrance. Just as the aide had said, there was a carriage waiting for him.

The guard opened the carriage door. "Lord Banaza, please board here."

It didn't seem like he was being given a choice. All he could do was get in the carriage.

They're really just going to send me away like this, without explaining anything?

Banaza knew full well what was going on—this was all just a polite way of getting rid of someone they had decided was trouble. A "failed hero" being allowed near the castle must have been inconvenient for them, somehow.

Still, they could at least tell me a little about what's going on.

As he was thinking, the door suddenly slammed shut. There was an ominous clatter from just beyond the carriage walls. Banaza tried pushing on the door, but it wouldn't budge. It appeared to be locked from the other side.

Banaza unconsciously knit his brows and sank into his seat, sighing heavily. It wasn't that he'd had any mind to run away, but to be treated like some kind of criminal...

Suddenly, and with considerable speed, the cart began to move. Banaza looked out the window, his gaze transfixed on the castle as it got smaller and smaller in the distance.

There was a small window at the front of his compartment, which Banaza opened. "Excuse me," he said. "Coachman?"

"What is it?" the man asked with no trace of amity in his words. "I've been told not to speak with you, I'm afraid. No idle conversation." True to his words, he went silent.

Banaza was a bit offended by the man's attitude, but did his best to put on a cheerful tone. "There's no need for that," he began. "It's just that I don't know anything at all about these lands. You know, I'm being sent away against my will to some faraway place. Would it really be so wrong to talk to me, even just to kill time until we get there?"

It was some time before the coachman responded. "Just a little, I guess," he said brusquely.

For the rest of the trip, Banaza and the coachman exchanged words, and little by little he got answers to his questions. The coachman told him that it would take at least twenty days to reach the Delaveza Forest, even by carriage. It was a wild land, far from any

human settlements. "It's just a rumor," he explained, "but they say the Dark Army has been seen around there lately. Be careful."

Banaza was dumbfounded by the coachman's words. *Twenty days from the castle... No human cities in the area... How am I supposed to live somewhere like that?* He sighed deeply. *Even if I am just a nuisance to them, would it really be so much to expect just a little more than this? Couldn't they have made arrangements for me to live somewhere? Maybe not in the castle itself, but in the castle town, or one of the nearby villages...*

He had a feeling that if he were to voice his dissatisfaction, though, he would find himself locked away to die in the castle dungeon. At least, he told himself, he still had his freedom.

After twenty days, the carriage arrived in the Delaveza Forest.

The coachman let Banaza out in a grassy meadow in front of the forest itself. "This is where I take my leave, Milord," he said. For the past twenty days, this man had been with him constantly, not letting him leave the carriage except to relieve himself (and even then, he had to do his business with a straw rope tied around his waist).

Banaza stepped out of the carriage and began to thoroughly stretch his aching body. From the meadow, he could see the thick foliage of the forest before him.

"That right there is the Delaveza Forest. You are expected to make your home somewhere inside. And, finally, I've been instructed to give you this." The coachman handed him a small bag.

"Is this...a Bottomless Bag?"

"You know about them?"

"Yes, well," Banaza answered, "I used them sometimes in my previous job."

Bottomless Bag: a magic item with the power to store items of a considerable size. Although it appeared small on the outside, the inside was as large as a treasury. Bottomless Bags existed in Banaza's world as well, and as a merchant he had used them often. He had never owned one himself—they were very expensive magic items, after all—but had borrowed them from his employer.

"Well, you might not need it, but it comes with an instruction manual," said the coachman. "And I'm gonna need you to sign the receipt." He handed Banaza a piece of paper, with "receipt" written at the top, and one item listed below: "Bottomless Bag."

"If it's all right with you, I'd like to confirm the bag's contents," said Banaza.

The coachman folded his arms and replied, curt as ever. "That one paper was all they gave me. Sorry."

Ah well, I guess I'll see what's inside for myself, and then sign the

receipt.

Banaza reached for the bag, but the coachman pushed his arm down, suddenly flustered. “H-Hey! Wait!” he shouted. Banaza looked up at the coachman, startled by his sudden change in behavior. The coachman met his eyes. “P-Please... You can’t look until I leave,” he said. “Those were my instructions.”

Banaza was suspicious—the coachman sounded agitated. They must have cheated him of something, or else why would the coachman act like this? But the coachman was stubborn on this point, only repeating himself over and over. In the end, Banaza relented, and signed the receipt without checking.

The coachman took the receipt from Banaza and hurriedly boarded the carriage, barely saying farewell as he took off. Banaza waved goodbye, calling after him in a loud voice. “Thank you for looking after me!” But the carriage sped away, sparing no reply. Before long, it had vanished behind a hill.

Banaza watched it leave with a strained expression and took the bag from where he had stowed it on his belt. *I hope this works the same as Bottomless Bags in my world*, he thought, slowly bringing his senses to focus on the bag. As he did, he felt like he could see a window appear in midair. On it was text, showing a list of what he supposed was the bag’s contents. Relieved that the bag seemed to operate like the ones he was used to, Banaza took in the information displayed in the window.

Bottomless Bag:

◇100,000 gold

Legal tender of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.

◇1 set of Magic Homesteading Kit

Creates a house in the desired location. A Magic Item with remodeling, recovery, and reuse enabled.

◇1 Bag of Endless Water

A Magic Item that produces unlimited potable water.

◇99 Simple Preserved Rations

Preserved meals.

◇20 Garments

Full outfits suitable for an adventurer.

◇8 Armaments

Sets of weapons suitable for an adventurer.

◇3 sets of Agriculture and Construction Tools

General tools used for agriculture, construction, and excavation.

Banaza folded his arms, reading the list several times as he considered what he should do next. *In any event, it looks like I can set*

up a house easily enough, so I don't need to worry about where I'm going to live. They gave me plenty of food too... He sighed in relief and closed the window.

Hm? Just then, Banaza caught sight of something strange. Something was flying out of the Delaveza Forest, hurtling in his direction. On closer inspection, it was a slime. A slime charging right at him, unwavering in its path.

Banaza hastily looked around, trying to find somewhere to hide, but there was nowhere he could possibly conceal himself in the flat grassy meadow.

Am I going to have to fight this thing?

He rushed to draw a sword from his bag, but when he set eyes on the weapon, he was dumbfounded. "Oh no. This sword is terrible!"

In his time as a merchant, Banaza had excelled at discerning the quality of weapons, and all it took was a single glance to see the sword was an inferior item. Meanwhile, the slime was almost upon him.

It's all I have. I guess I've just gotta make do.

Banaza steeled himself and readied his blade, preparing to receive the slime's attack. The slime sprung from the ground, flying at him, its body spread wide like a net.

"A-Aaah!"

Banaza was afraid, but he swung his sword all the same, frantic and desperate. He scored a lucky hit! His sword pierced the slime's core, and the monster fell to the ground, defeated. It quickly vanished into thin air.

Banaza stared at it, panting and still on guard. "Ah... Thank goodness. I got it. Somehow." Relieved, he plopped to the ground. Another window suddenly appeared in his field of vision. It spread open before his eyes like the one from before, but the text in this window was different. This window told him that he had leveled up, and displayed his attributes as they increased.

But what Banaza saw made him tilt his head in confusion.

Level Up!

Lv: 2

Strength: ∞

Defense: ∞

Speed: ∞

Magic: ∞

HP: ∞

Skills: ∞

“I get that I went up a level,” Banaza said aloud, uncomprehending, “but... What does this mean? What does this symbol mean?” He racked his brains, but it was no use. No matter how hard he thought, no answers came to him.

The ∞ symbol appears when someone’s attributes have grown past the upper limit, and can no longer be displayed. When Banaza was Level 1, his attributes were completely typical of an average person in this world. However, as soon as he reached Level 2, every one of his attributes rose higher than any hero in all of history. Even the Dark One would be nothing to him as he was now. Furthermore, he had instantly mastered every spell and every skill that existed in the world. This was the true blessing the gods bestowed on him upon his summoning: “Transcendence.”

Banaza, of course, had yet to realize this. He kept checking his status and pondering fruitlessly.



Banaza continued to stare at his ability scores for a while longer. “I guess if I don’t know what it means,” he muttered, “I’m not going to figure it out by thinking about it.” He sighed quietly and turned to look in the direction of the forest. “Either way, I need to figure out where I’m going to live, don’t I?” He looked at the bag on his belt. With the construction magic he had, all he would need to do was decide where he wanted to put his house, and the magic would do the rest. Banaza looked around, trying to decide on a location, when yet again he saw a window appear. This window, however, was clearly different from the ones he had seen before—its border was flashing red.

“Wh-What is it this time?” Banaza swallowed unconsciously.

Warning: Concealed enchantment detected in item in your possession!

High possibility of danger to holder!

Bottomless Bag:

◇Location-Tracking Magic

Reports location of holder to spellcaster at regular intervals.

◇Forced Recovery Magic

Compels item to return to spellcaster upon holder’s death.

◇Monster-Luring Magic

Enchants item to automatically lure monsters.

Force Dispel?

◇Yes

◇No

Banaza felt himself break into a cold sweat.

The Homing and the Forced Recovery enchantments were innocuous enough, but the third item on the list, the “Monster-Luring Magic,” was another matter entirely. There was no other explanation: whoever enchanted the item could only have been trying to make monsters attack him. The slime earlier, who attacked out of nowhere, must have been affected by the spell.

Basically, they want me to hurry up and die. Banaza was stunned. “But...” he glanced at the last line in the message. “I can...force it to dispel?”

As if in response to his words, another window popped up.

All enchantments can be dispelled.

Force Dispel?

◇Yes

◇No

Well, Banaza thought as he read the new window, that would be “yes,” I suppose.

The instant he had the thought, the bag on his belt started to glow faintly. The windows vanished, and a new window appeared:

The following enchantments have been forcibly dispelled:

◇Location-Tracking Magic

◇Forced Recovery Magic

◇Monster-Luring Magic

Banaza cocked his head in thought again as he read. “So, the hidden enchantments are gone now?”

Another window appeared.

The following spells are in constant effect in your vicinity.

Among these, the spells Magic Vigilance and Dispel Magic have been activated.

◇Magic Vigilance

Displays a warning when encountering spells or enchantments holding hostile intent.

◇Dispel Magic

Removes spells or enchantments holding hostile intent at the caster’s discretion.

◇Magic Radar

Detects the presence of traps or beings with hostile intent within 100 kilmas.

◇Auto-mapping

Automatically creates a mental map of the area within 100 kilmas of the caster. Corporeal manifestation is possible.

Continue to next page?

◇Yes

◇No

Banaza continued as he was prompted. There were six pages total, he learned, all filled with passive spells that were constantly active in the area around him. In total, there were forty-six. But before he looked over all of them, Banaza found himself thinking again.

There's no reason I should be able to use magic at all... Why would there be all these passive spells affecting me? Am I the one casting them? What's going on?

Banaza folded his arms and thought as hard as he could. After a period of intense contemplation, he came to the following conclusions:

One: I have just reached Level 2.

Two: In this world, this level of magic is typical for anyone who has reached Level 2.

"Yeah," he mumbled. "Yeah, that's gotta be it." He nodded his head several times as if he had come to an understanding.

Incidentally, passive spells were magic skills available to spellcasters who had mastered over eighty percent of all spells in existence. In the entire world, there were only twenty people who had access to them. Among those twenty, even the person with the greatest number of passive spells had no more than four. All that is to say that having reached Level 2, Banaza was without a doubt the greatest magic user in the world. This too was an effect of the blessing of Transcendence. Some passive spells would cause windows to appear from time to time, magically displaying information in response to the caster's needs. If the caster wished for it, however, there was also the option to turn off the display.

Banaza would never have thought of himself as any kind of exceptional person. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined the magnitude of the powers he now had.

"Right, I was going to look for a place to live." Banaza had been lost in thought for a while. He let out a breath, and began to walk towards the forest.

As he did, yet another window appeared. This one was the same kind as the one from earlier, with the flashing red border. "Oh, what is it now?" Startled, Banaza took a look.

**Warning: This forest suffers from heavy malicium pollution.
Use Purification?**

◇Yes

◇No

This sent Banaza back into confusion. *Malicium? What in the world?* In response to his thoughts, another window appeared.

◇Malicium

General term referring to liquid or gas containing elemental particles of dark magic, highly toxic to humans. Chiefly spread or generated by powerful demons.

Banaza nodded along as he read. “Well, in that case, I should do something about it if I can.” Mentally, he selected “yes.”

Another window appeared.

Notice: This spell will use 1/3 of your total magic power.

Cast spell?

◇Yes

◇No

I mean, I didn't have any magic power at all, originally. One third of my total magic can't be that much, so this must not be that big of a deal, right?

Banaza selected “yes” again, in part just to spite the notice. A brilliant light emanated from the area around him. At once, the light began to expand, quickly spreading out before his eyes until it encompassed the vast Delaveza Forest in its entirety.

“Wh-What the—?!”

For a while, Banaza could only stare in amazement at the overwhelming vastness of the light. Before him, the dazzling radiance shrunk and vanished. It only took five seconds. The Delaveza Forest seemed altogether unchanged.

“Oh,” said Banaza. “I guess that spell doesn't actually do much.”

Somewhat relieved to see the forest unaffected, Banaza called up his status screen and checked his magic. There didn't seem to be a numerical value displayed, but he saw a bar that he assumed indicated his total magic power. One third of it had gone black. *I suppose that's the magic I spent casting Purification.* He nodded. The black portion of the bar was gradually filling in—it looked like it would be fully restored in two minutes.

“That makes sense. I don't have a lot of magic, so the third of it I used is going to recover pretty quickly.” Banaza smiled wryly, perfectly ignorant of the extraordinary recovery abilities that came with Transcendence.

◇Meanwhile, in Klyrode Castle◇

The Department of Magic was located within Klyrode Castle. There, magi and witches worked day and night to develop detection spells in order to descry the magic used by the Dark Army, and to observe their movements. At that moment, however, the whole department was in complete disarray.

One mage, clearly agitated, was reporting to the department head. “Chief!” he exclaimed. “There’s trouble! We’ve confirmed the signs: someone just cast the spell Purification, the absolute apex of Holy Magic!”

The department head was an old man with a white beard and an extravagant robe. At the mage’s words, his face seemed to light up. “Ooh! That must be the Golden-Haired Hero on his quest to vanquish the Dark One—make no mistake! They say he’s one-in-a-century, after all. Only he could have managed to reach the pinnacle of magic so quickly!” He spoke excitedly, making a tight fist with his right hand. The mage who had made the report, however, looked troubled.

“W-Well, Chief, that is... The Hero is supposed to have set off for the south. But it seems that the spell in question was cast in the far north...”

The department head looked astonished, and fixed the mage with a sharp look. “Don’t be ridiculous, boy! You must have made some sort of mistake. You know that Purification is our ultimate weapon, our last resort, a spell that takes the combined powers of every mage in Klyrode! If not the Hero, who else could have possibly cast it?”

“Yes,” said the mage, “yes, well...”

The two of them stared at each other in silence, and the Department of Magic continued in its disarray.

◇The Delaveza Forest◇

Yet another window appeared after Banaza cast Purification. It seemed like he had leveled up again, but when he read the details, he was once again left confused.

Lv: 367

Strength: ∞

Defense: ∞

Speed: ∞

Magic: ∞

HP: ∞

Skills: ∞

“...Excuse me?”

Banaza was sure he had been Level 2 after defeating the slime from earlier. But this new window was telling him that he had jumped all the way to Level 367. “All I did was use that Purification spell. It’s not like I defeated any monsters...”

Troubled, Banaza again turned to his thoughts, trying to figure out the cause of all this. But no matter how much he thought, nothing came to mind.

The truth was, a division of the Dark Army had concealed themselves deep in the Delaveza Forest. The malicium Banaza had detected was their handiwork. When Banaza had used Purification, the entire division was caught in the spell and annihilated. Banaza, who defeated the demons, had gained an army’s worth of experience, his level skyrocketing to dizzying heights.

In fact, the army stationed in the forest was led by one of the Dark One’s Infernal Four: Fengaryl, the Wild Wolf. Fengaryl was a legendary demon who had slain tens of thousands of soldiers of Klyrode with his own hands, feared as the greatest of the four.

Banaza, of course, had no idea his spell had done any of this. As hard as he tried to deduce the cause of his rapid level up, he found no answers—only frustration.

After thinking and thinking, and thinking some more, Banaza reached the following conclusion:

“I must not be good enough at magic. I think it isn’t displaying things correctly.” He nodded his head several times, trying to convince himself.

In the end, Banaza decided that he couldn’t trust the level-up notices and switched the display settings to “off,” never to open them again.

I really can’t keep on worrying about this.

Banaza glanced at the forest, leaving the issue to take care of itself. It had been purged, true, but up until just a moment before, this forest was polluted with dark energy. Banaza found himself hesitant to go in. *But they said I’m not allowed to live in the city. I mean, they sent me off to die. If they find out I’ve been going into towns, they might arrest me, right? What am I supposed to do...*

As he folded his arms in thought, a new window appeared:

Suggested Spell: Shapeshift*Changes the appearance of your body.*
Cast?

◇Yes

◇No

Banaza inclined his head. *I see... If I change how I look, they might not realize that it’s me in town.* He selected “yes” and a new window

came up.

Sex?

◇Male

◇Female

Height?

◇Tall

◇Average

◇Short

Race?

◇Human

◇Demihuman

◇Demon

...

.....

.....

Oh dear, this looks like it's going to be a bit of work...

Banaza went through the options one by one, a wry smile on his face. It took a considerable amount of time, but he finished his selections and ended up transformed into a pretty regular-looking person: male, human, and average height. He looked nothing like his original slender self with a beautiful face that people often mistook for a woman's.

"And now I need to figure out what to wear..." Banaza mumbled to himself as he took several outfits out of the bag. Just like the sword, however, they were all of abysmal quality. There was one that had ripped before he'd even had the chance to wear it.

I knew it. There's no way I can wear these. He had just started to worry himself about the state of his clothes when another window appeared.

Restructure Clothing Spell can be used to redesign this outfit.

Cast?

◇Yes

◇No

Oh? I can change clothes too? Banaza mentally selected "yes."

Please visualize the form you would like the outfit to be restructured to.

Following the instructions on this new window, Banaza imagined a set of clothes styled for an adventurer. In a second, the clothes in

front of him transformed to look exactly like the image in his mind. “Okay, this works!” Banaza pulled forcefully at the fabric, testing its strength. When he was sure there was nothing wrong with it, he put it on. And, thinking that it would be dangerous to go by “Banaza,” he decided to borrow the name of his old pet dog, Flio.

“All right, I think I’m ready. But the real problem is the sheer distance.” Banaza (or rather, Flio) looked in the direction the carriage had vanished in and sighed. It had taken him twenty days by carriage to come here. How long would it take on foot? Flio crossed his arms, and, once again, a window appeared.



Travel to Castle Town using Teleportation?

◇Yes

◇No

“Teleportation?” Flio looked perturbed.

I’ve heard of that spell before... In my world, it’s high-level magic. Doesn’t it let you instantly travel anywhere as long as you’ve been there before?

As he was thinking, a new window appeared.

◇Teleportation

Teleports caster to a location previously visited with pinpoint accuracy. Others in the range of effect may be brought along at the caster’s discretion.

Oh, huh! Flio thought. It’s the same as my old world.

Flio selected “yes,” and instantly found himself in the town of Klyrode Castle. His eyes went wide. “Wait, I-I’m really in the city?!” Flio had thought the idea that a spell he could cast would actually let him teleport like this was too good to be true. He was shocked that it had actually worked.

Incredible... So this is Teleportation. I really traveled the distance of a twenty-day carriage ride in a single second...

As worked up as he was over the spell, Flio didn’t want the people around him to take notice. Doing his best to appear calm, he hid himself within the crowd on the city streets, wandering aimlessly. *I should find an inn to stay at, he thought, and while I’m here, I should try to learn about this world. I can figure out what comes next later.* He began to look for an inn as he walked.

He caught sight of one off the main street—according to its sign, it was called The Jewel’s Blessing. “I guess I’ll try this one,” he said.

There was a restaurant on the first floor of the inn. It was midday, and there was a small crowd of humans and demihumans here for lunch. The innkeeper—a woman who looked from her face to be in her early forties—was cooking. “Welcome!” she said in a cheerful voice. “I haven’t seen you before. Are you new to the city?” She gave Flio a calm smile.

“Yes, I’m a novice adventurer from a small village to the east. My name is Flio. I’m looking for an inn. Do you have rooms available?”

The innkeeper smiled at Flio’s words. “Oh, yes, no problem! We have rooms open at the moment, as it just so happens. You’re more than welcome to stay.”

She quoted him a price, but prices here were different from Flio’s

world and he had no sense of the value of his money. Regardless, he took one of the coins out from his bag and gave it to her.

"I wouldn't have guessed you were nobility from looking at you!" The innkeeper laughed. "That'll be enough to cover our best room for almost half a year."

"I, umm," Flio began, trying to come up with an excuse to keep up appearances. "M-My party and I managed to strike it rich... I'm on my way home now..."

The innkeeper accepted his money without inquiring further. "Your room is on the second floor, furthest to the back. As I said before, the amount you've given us is good for a half-year stay. I'll return your remaining balance when you check out, but I'm hoping you stay with us for a while!" She gave him a wink. Flio could only return a strained smile.

With the room key he had gotten from the innkeeper in hand, Flio followed her directions and entered the furthest back room on the second floor. Inside, there were two very big beds, and even a bath. In Flio's world, if an inn room came with a "bath," most of the time it would consist of nothing more than a bucket of hot water and a rag to wipe your body with. With that as his baseline, this really did seem like the image of an inn's "best room."

After taking stock of the room and a short rest, Flio decided it was time to get ready to venture forth into the town and gather information. Thinking he would like to present himself as a mage, he reached into his bag and removed a splintered plank he had found on the roadside.

"Okay," Flio muttered, turning his focus to trying to transform the wood with magic. "Let's see how this goes." He thought about what he wanted, and as he did, suggestions appeared telling him what spells to cast. Flio was starting to get a good handle on this, and he found the work quite easy. In no time at all, the plank of wood had become an ornate magic staff. "Yeah, this'll do, I think." Flio gave a satisfied nod and descended the stairs to the first-floor restaurant, staff in hand.

Flio's plan was to eat a meal here, and at the same time, see what he could learn. As he took a seat, the innkeeper quickly hurried to his table with a drink of water. "Well, if it isn't Mister Flio. How are you finding the room? It's our best, you know, since you're a VIP and all." She brought her lips close to Flio's ear and whispered. "And let me know if you're ever looking for a girl. I'll be happy to give you our *special service*." As she withdrew, she gave him a mischievous wink.

"Ah ha ha," Flio laughed, forcing himself to smile again, "you have quite the sense of humor, miss."

The innkeeper smiled brightly. "It wouldn't hurt you to live a little, you know. If you're interested, I certainly wouldn't mind."

Still with a forced smile on his face, Flio ordered the lunch special, mostly as a ploy to escape this topic of conversation. The innkeeper took his order and headed to the kitchen. Flio watched her leave. *Finally*, he thought. *Free at last*.

Internally breathing a sigh of relief, Flio brought his focus in on his sense of hearing. While he waited for his lunch, he set to listen in on the conversations around him, hoping to see what he could learn. As he did, windows kept popping up telling him about all kinds of skills and spells that had to do with eavesdropping, several of which he used.

In the end, Flio learned the following: the Golden-Haired Hero had departed for the south, some mysterious great magic was used in a forest to the north, many people were complaining of goblin damage, and the quality of slaves had worsened as of late.

“Sorry for the wait.” Flio had been pretending to stare out the window as he listened to the conversations around him when a dog-type demihuman came up to him with his order. She seemed to be a worker here.

“I’m sorry if this is a rude question,” Flio said, smiling at her, “but are you contracted here as a slave?”

“Oh, we don’t do things like that here,” she replied. “The landlady treats us all like family.”

Flio made an astonished noise without meaning to. *This really is another world. Free demihumans working in the castle town...* In his world, human supremacy pervaded everything. If you saw a demihuman working in a restaurant like this, without exception they would be a slave.

“I really can’t stay and chat,” said the dog girl. “I don’t want to get scolded.” She bowed deeply and returned to the back of the shop. Flio thanked her and turned his attention towards the meal.

The meal consisted of two rolls of bread, a hearty vegetable soup, and a heaping plate of stir-fried meat and potatoes. It was good, simple fare, and Flio felt like he could understand why this place was still crowded even though it was already a little past midday. He had eaten nothing but tins of poor-quality preserved food the coachman had given him during his trip to the Delaveza Forest; presented with food like this, he ate voraciously. It didn’t take him long at all to finish.

“Thank you for the meal!” Flio said, addressing the innkeeper, who was still busy in the kitchen. “My compliments to the chef.” She smiled giddily.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it! Dinner’s going to be even better, so you’d better stick around.” She gave him another wink. Flio managed to return her smile, with just a bit of embarrassment.

Chapter 2: Fenrys

Flio decided to go for a walk after his meal. He'd been eavesdropping on conversations at the inn when he heard about a guild for adventurers, and figured he might as well check it out. In Flio's original world, these guilds were places where registered adventurers would take posted jobs calling for monster hunters or caravan guards or the like, and receive payment. Newly arrived as he was, Flio had no connections in this world, and it seemed to him that the rewards for posted jobs at a place like that would be the best way to make money quickly.

He had scarcely begun to make his way through the city when a small window appeared in front of him, giving him directions:

Continue ahead to reach the Klyrode Castle Town Adventurers' Association.

This was the effect of one of his passive skills: Guidance. With its help, Flio could navigate easily through this completely unknown city.

As he was walking, Flio felt a presence behind him. "Hm?" He looked out of the corner of his eye and saw a child dressed in rags carefully drawing closer to him, looking intently at his possessions like a thief. The child reached out his hand to grab Flio's Bottomless Bag, but his hand was deflected by a magic barrier. A number of Flio's passive spells activated at once.

"Wh-What?" the child blurted out in surprise. The next instant, a rope appeared at the child's feet and rose up, tying his legs together. Tightly bound, he lost his balance and fell.

Flio turned to get a good look at the would-be thief. He was painfully thin, and his clothing was in tatters. It was easy to assume that he'd only turned to theft out of hunger and desperation. The boy was trying to say something, but the ropes had moved up his body, pulling tighter and gagging him. Flio couldn't make out his words.

"Hey, that's—" a voice called out.

"What in the world?!"

A crowd was starting to form around them, drawn by the sight of a fallen child wrapped up in ropes. Flio frantically looked around. Not wanting to get involved in any kind of trouble, he took a gold coin from his bag and stuck it through a gap in the rope binding. Then, he

leaned close to the child's ear. "Don't do that again, okay?" he whispered, stepping away and releasing the spell.

Disoriented at being suddenly free, the child darted away into the crowd. Flio watched him go until he was completely out of sight, and then stepped into the crowd himself, using magic to conceal his presence. Before long, he reached the guild.

The guild was a fairly large two-story building. The first floor held the reception area as well as a food hall and weapon shops. On the second floor, there were rooms for adventurers to stay overnight.

First things first, I need to register myself as an adventurer. With that in mind, Flio walked up to a counter he saw marked by a sign hanging from the ceiling that said "Adventurer Reception." A red-haired elf was sitting behind the desk. She smiled as Flio approached.

"Good afternoon," she said. "How can I help you? Are you here to register as an adventurer? Or are you looking for a job?"

"I want a job, please," said Flio. "Do I need to register first?"

"Yes," she said, still smiling. "That's how our organization works."

"I've never done this before. Would you mind giving me a simple overview?"

"Of course! I'm here to help." Flio smiled politely at her words. "Now then," she continued, beginning to explain.

According to the receptionist, the first step for an aspiring adventurer would be to register themselves with the guild. They would take jobs and earn merit, rising in rank in proportion to their achievements. Higher-ranked adventurers could undertake more difficult jobs that promised greater rewards.

It was possible to take jobs from the guild without registering as an adventurer, but registered adventurers were eligible for provision funds to pay for any gear deemed necessary for the job as payment up front, and if they happened to be injured while undergoing a mission, they could receive healing free of charge from the guild's witches. It was no surprise that most adventurers chose to register. However, if a registered adventurer abandoned a job partway through or failed to complete it in the allotted time, they would be obligated to pay a penalty fee for the breach of contract.

There were also certain jobs listed as "unranked." These jobs were considered exceptionally difficult. There was no penalty for abandoning an unranked job, but also no payment upfront and no free healing if an adventurer was wounded in their attempt, no matter how serious the injury. For the most part, they were hardly considered worth it. On the other hand, many of them offered immense rewards if a party could pull it off (although there were some cases where the client simply wasn't able to provide an appropriate reward for the difficulty, or lacked adequate information concerning the request).

You could rise in rank very quickly by succeeding on unranked jobs, but you'd be courting death if you made it a habit.

After listening carefully to the explanation, Flio finalized his registration and was given a small, silver pendant tied with a braided cord. "Your adventurer profile and all of your information is magically recorded inside," the elf said. "You can check it using magic. When you accept or complete a job, be sure to bring it here so that we can record your achievements."

Flio brought the plate in front of his eyes. A letter was projected on the surface of either side. "What does this 'E' mean?" he asked.

"That's your rank. Adventurers' ranks go from E at the lowest, to S at the highest. Everyone starts at rank E."

"I see. And I'll gain ranks as I take jobs?"

"Yes, exactly."

"All right," said Flio, putting the pendant around his neck. "In that case I'll just have to do my best to make this thing into an 'S'!"

The woman smiled at him. "I look forward to seeing you in action! Now, I just need one silver as a registration fee." She held out her right hand.

"Can I pay with this?" asked Flio, taking a gold coin out of his bag and handing it to her.

"Yes, of course." The elf took his coin with a smile, then gave Flio his change back in silver.

Paid and registered, Flio walked quickly to the board where jobs on offer were displayed, but he ended up stopping short of the board itself. Before him, standing by the board, was a lone, young girl. She seemed to be approaching adventurers who came to see what jobs were available and pleading with them about something. "Hm?" Flio wondered aloud. "What's going on with that girl?"

It struck Flio as suspicious, so he decided to try to listen in. He focused on his hearing and several of his skills activated—now he could hear her more clearly.

"Excuse me, sir," she said, again and again to different adventurers. "Would you please escort me to the Delaveza Forest?" A client could have their request displayed on the board as a proper job for a set fee, but this girl seemed to lack the money and could only work outside the rank system and approach adventurers individually. The Delaveza Forest was rumored to be an abode of demons, but the girl could only offer a few coppers as payment with no provision funds upfront. It was very poor conditions for a job, and most of the adventurers simply ignored her.

One of them took pity. "It's a twenty-day ride," the adventurer said. "I'll do it if you can at least pay for a cart, and food for the trip." But it seemed like the girl lacked money even for that, and they, too,

walked away.

Flio watched from a short distance. *The Delaveza Forest... he thought. I was just there. I could make the trip in no time using Teleportation. It looks like she's in some real trouble...* He walked up to the girl.

"Excuse me, miss, would you like me to take you?" he said.

The girl jumped in surprise and turned around to look at Flio. It seemed like she had been on the verge of giving up. She looked him over and said, "Um, I can't offer much of a reward. Is that okay?"

Flio smiled calmly. "I mean, if all you need is someone to bring you there, it won't take any time at all with my Teleportation skill. I'll gladly do it for free."

The adventurers around him started to whisper. "Wait, wait, did he say he can cast Teleportation? That kid?"

"It's gotta be a lie... Not even a good one, at that," said another.

"As if an E-Rank adventurer could cast Teleportation."

Flio swore internally as he heard the adventurers whispering around him. He had been able to cast the spell so easily before that he had assumed it was a basic spell in this world, one that anyone who had even the slightest bit of magic could cast. He had no idea that he would cause such a commotion just by saying the name. Flio made a troubled expression and scratched the back of his head.

A lady-knight walked up to Flio, standing between himself and the girl and staring him straight in the face. "You say you can cast the spell Teleportation? Forgive my rudeness, but you look nothing like the kind of elite magic user it would take to use such a high-rank spell," she scoffed. "What are you scheming? If you mean to abuse her or sell her off..." She fixed Flio with a sneer of open contempt through the eyehole of her helmet. A number of women were standing behind her—her party, most likely—glaring at Flio with the selfsame expression.

Flio faced the knight and her party in turn, giving them his best smile. *This is what I get for speaking too freely I guess... Now everyone thinks I'm a creep. I've probably scared the girl too... Now what?*

He thought furiously behind his fake smile, until he finally hit on an idea. "Oh, I know," he said to the knight. "Why don't you all come with me? I'd be happy to share the reward with you."

The knight went to discuss the matter with her companions. They huddled together for a while, speaking in murmurs. Flio could have easily listened in on their conversation with his eavesdropping skills, but he thought better of it. *I don't want to give them another reason to be suspicious of me...*

Finally, the four of them concluded their discussion and the knight stepped forward. She faced Flio directly and said, "We'll take you up

on your offer. However, we will respond to any threatening movements in kind, so don't even think about it." She was plainly dead serious.

Their discussions concluded, all six of them including Flio, the knight, and the young girl left the Adventurers' Association behind them. Flio wanted to go somewhere where nobody could watch him use Teleportation, so they turned the corner to a back alley.

"This is as good a place as any," said the knight. She was being a little forceful now that they were out of sight. "Go on, cast your spell."

Flio glanced at the knight's party, who had formed a circle around the girl to protect her. *Honestly, this seems like a bit too much caution*, he thought, inwardly annoyed. He turned to the group. "Okay. I'm gonna cast the spell. Gather around me, please."

The knight's party gathered around him dubiously. After Flio was sure they were all in range, he began to focus. He followed the instructions that appeared on the windows, and at once, they vanished from the street.

◇The Delaveza Forest◇

"Well, this is a surprise." The knight looked like she couldn't believe her eyes. The Delaveza Forest was spread out before them. The girl and the rest of the knight's party were no less astonished, glancing around the place in disbelief.

After she regained her wits, the knight approached Flio and lowered her head. "Sir Flio, was it? I apologize for my behavior earlier. I was wrong to suspect you."

One of her party came forward—she seemed to be a witch. "I've never seen anyone use Teleportation over such a long distance," she said. "You're a Grand Magus, then? A top-tier Grand Magus?" She looked bewildered more than anything.

Flio was as taken aback by her words as she was by his spell. "N-No," he said, desperately trying to explain, "I'm just a novice adventurer who happens to know a bit of magic..." Unsurprisingly, the witch seemed completely unconvinced. She continued to stare at him, puzzled.

As Flio and the witch were having their exchange, the girl anxiously rushed off towards the forest. Flio managed to escape the conversation and chased after her. The witch made to follow, but the knight stopped her in her tracks. She carefully watched the two of them.

Flio called out to her. "Miss, what's the matter?" She turned around.

"This forest, it..." she began, looking between Flio and the wooded area. "It... It's all gone. There's no malicium anywhere. It used to be

thick here, I'm sure of it..."

"Oh, that malicium," said Flio. She must have been talking about the malicium that he himself purged from the forest not long ago. Before his eyes, another window appeared, the type with the flashing red border. A warning.

Caution: It may be dangerous to relay your use of Purification to a demon.

After making sure of the window's message, Flio began looking fervently around the area. All he could see, though, was the young girl, the lady knight, and her party.

I don't see any demons...

Flio was standing there confused, when another window appeared:

Young Client: Demon (Lupine) disguised by magic to appear human.

Flio's eyes went wide, and he felt his pulse quicken. Meanwhile, the knight's party, who had been observing the two from a distance, began to advance on the girl. The knight drew her sword, as did one of her companions, a woman wearing heavy cavalry armor. The archer in the party kept her distance, readying her bow, and the witch began to chant, extending her arm in the girl's direction. It was clear that they were readying themselves for battle. The knight, their leader, came within striking range and stopped.

"Now. Isn't it time you showed us your true form, little girl?" she commanded, her sword at the ready.

"You wanted to go here?" said the archer, keeping her bow trained. "With all the Dark One's minions running around? Did you think we're stupid?"

The party had the girl surrounded, their eyes trained on her like hawks, waiting for her to make a move. "I'm terribly sorry to involve you in this, Sir Adventurer," said the knight, not taking her eyes off the girl as she addressed Flio. "We received a report at the castle about a 'suspicious little girl.' This girl has been coming to the Adventurers' Association for several days now looking for someone to bring her here. Our original plan was to go along with her, and reveal her true form by force once we were on the road, but we arrived at the guild just as you spoke to her. We cast aspersions on you as a way to involve ourselves. I'm truly sorry."

As the knight spoke, her brawny companion in the heavy armor—the person nearest to Flio—took two, three steps towards him. "We

were thinking of letting you know what was up when we were on the road,” she said. “We didn’t expect you to actually cast Teleportation. Sorry for that.” She brought her hands together in front of her face in a gesture of apology.

“Well then,” said the knight, addressing the cornered girl, “answer me!”

There was a strange fire in the girl’s eyes as she glanced at the knight, the corners of her mouth twisting into a sneer. “Hmpf. So, a knight from the castle then. And it sounds like you think you have me trapped.” As she spoke, her shape began to change. Her mouth split open. Hair grew all over her body. Ears sprouted from her head and her nails became sharp claws.

She had become an enormous wolf.

The knight and her party stepped back, awed by the wolf’s imposing presence. Fear was written on their faces. The archer froze in place, too frightened to move, unable even to fire her bow. The wolf’s eyes darted around at the knight’s party. “Well? Is that what you think? That you have me, the great Fenrys, sister of Fengaryl of the Dark One’s Infernal Four, caught in a trap?!”

Fenrys bared her fangs as malicium filled the air around her. The knight’s party was in a state of panic. “We were expecting something in the league of a scout... She’s in the same class as the Infernal Four!” The knight shrunk before the wolf’s majesty, unable to move even a muscle.

The heavy-armored fighter drew close to the knight, looking desperate and afraid. “We need to get out of here,” she said. “We’re no match for this thing!” However, as she spoke she noticed the beast move right in front of her, and she too found herself awestruck, frozen in place. The mage and the archer had already collapsed to the ground, completely immobile. The whole party was helpless. Fenrys regarded them with a haughty grin.

As for Flio, he was standing there watching this all unfold. Whatever aura Fenrys had didn’t seem to affect him—he felt completely fine. “Well, well,” said Fenrys, her surprise registering on her face, “at least *you* seem to have some spine.” She grinned again, as arrogant as before. “Wait here a moment. I’ll see to you once I’ve finished them off.” She lowered herself down, preparing to attack.

This looks pretty bad, Flio thought. He spun to look at Fenrys’s target, the immobilized knight. *Can I cast Teleportation and have it only affect them?* Flio began to focus.

“Now, perish!” Fenrys shouted as she leapt into the air. The knight squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for death. But just at the last moment, Flio completed navigating the windows.

“Send the knight and her party back to city!” Flio shouted. As he

said the words, the knight and her party vanished instantly. Fenrys was a second too late, her jaws biting fruitlessly at the empty space where the knight had been.

“Where did she...?” Fenrys quickly glanced around the area, dumbfounded. But the knight and her party were nowhere to be seen. “Don’t tell me... You did this?” she said, turning to look at Flio. “You’re tougher than you look. And I brought you here thinking you’d be prey for my brother and his minions...” She licked her lips, readying herself to attack again, this time targeting Flio.

“No way,” Flio muttered. “I don’t feel like dying quite yet.” He was glancing between Fenrys and his window display as he spoke. He selected a spell.

“Eh?!” Fenrys felt an unbelievable weight pressing on her body, forcing her to the ground. The pressure was too strong to resist. She fell down to her knees, front paws splayed out. *Wh-What is this?* She tried to speak, but the literal gravity of the situation forbade her from even opening her mouth. She tried to muster her strength, to get to her feet, but it was completely impossible. She was stuck down on her knees, unable to move a muscle. *Wh-What magic is this? Even I can’t fight it...*

In the Dark Army, Fenrys was known for her overwhelming magic power and her unbreachable magic resistance, both of which she had been blessed with since birth. But even she was overwhelmed by this spell, her whole body immobilized. She stared in open shock, struck by the reality of her situation. *N-No...* She tried to cast the spell Low Gravity, desperately chanting its invocation in her mind—but her spell broke and shattered, making a hollow sound like glass breaking.

Clink!

No way!

Shocked and afraid, Fenrys began casting any spell she could think of, one after another in rapid succession. *Short Range Teleportation! Meteoric Leap! Positional Exchange!* But every time, as soon as she finished each mental incantation, the spell broke with the same hollow sound.

Clink! Clink! Clink!

Th-This can’t be happening... Frightened though she was, Fenrys stubbornly kept trying to use magic. The spells she was attempting, however, were very powerful, and before long she had completely exhausted her magic power.

Impossible! Human magic shouldn’t be able to do this!

Her face went pale. She was drained of magic, and this whole time her whole body was still being forced down by that unimaginable weight.

Is there no way out of this?

Her consciousness beginning to fade, Fenrys thought as hard as she could, but not a single even slightly useful idea came to mind. She couldn't move her body, her magic power was completely dry, and her mind was starting to feel cloudy. She had tried everything. It was hopeless.

With the last of her strength, Fenrys turned to look at Flio. "I surrender," she muttered. "Go ahead and kill me." She quietly closed her eyes. Suddenly, the force that had been pushing her down vanished. "H-Huh?" Fenrys had thought she would be killed for sure. Finding herself unexpectedly alive, she opened her eyes, bewildered. What she saw was Flio, kneeling down and extending his right arm towards her.

Fenrys transformed, changing her shape from the great wolf to that of a woman. This was not the form of the little girl she had used at the Adventurers' Association, but a beautiful and dignified lady with long, silvery hair—this was the humanoid form she could naturally adopt as a demon.

"I can't kill someone who's surrendered," said Flio, "and I don't especially enjoy fighting, anyway." He took off his cloak as he spoke and put it on Fenrys. Her clothes had been torn when she had changed into a wolf, and Flio wasted no time in covering her up.

Fenrys glanced up at Flio, frowning. "Aren't... Aren't you humans at war with demons? You know I'm an enemy soldier, right? Why would you spare me?"

"I may be a human, but I'm not from this world," said Flio, smiling wryly. "It honestly doesn't matter to me what kind of person you are, human or demon. I just don't want to kill someone who's surrendered. That's all." His face settled into a calm smile.

Flio's words only served to baffle Fenrys further. "How naive," she said, laughing sarcastically. "Far, far too naive." But despite herself, she was smiling. She no longer had any strength to oppose him.

There had been a window that kept stubbornly appearing in Flio's vision for a little while now, advising him to use a Subjugation spell to bind Fenrys to his service. *Maybe I am naive*, Flio thought. *But I just can't do something like that to someone at my mercy.* He set the window's display setting to "off."



"I...suppose I should thank you." Fenrys bowed slightly. She was wearing a set of adventurer's clothing she had gotten from Flio.

"There's really no need," Flio responded happily. "Those are just clothes I got from the castle. All I did was adjust them." As he said, Fenrys was wearing an outfit that had been in Flio's Bottomless Bag. Originally an inferior item, Flio had improved it and fitted it to

Fenrys's proportions with magic. *It looks pretty good on her, thankfully,* he thought.

"Incidentally," Flio said, addressing Fenrys with a smile, "you're free to go wherever you like, as long as you promise to stop attacking humans."

Fenrys smiled bitterly. "You really are naive. No... I suppose the proper word is 'kind.'" She went down on one knee. "You spared my life, when you would have been justified to kill me and take my pelt. From this day forward, I, Fenrys, swear to never attack a human without just cause." Flio nodded, satisfied. She continued:

"Furthermore, I hereby declare you as my master. I will repay this debt to you with my life." She bowed deeply.

"W-Wait!" Flio said, flabbergasted. "You don't owe me that kind of debt!" As he tried frantically to think of what he should say, Fenrys lowered her head, looking up at him.

"You reject me? Master... It is our law as lupines that we dedicate our life to the person we deem our master. If I can't do that, then...I would have to die." She grabbed hold of Flio's arm, looking at him with forlorn, pleading eyes.

"N-No," said Flio, unable to hide his distress. "I... I can't..."

Fenrys pressed herself even closer. "You can use me as a pack mule or a slave," she begged. "It doesn't matter what you do with me, Master. Just, please... Please let me be by your side."

Flio shook his head. "I don't need a pack mule or a slave!" he responded, frantic. "I don't want someone serving me like that!"

His mind was racing. *This isn't good... I don't think I can change her mind. But I'm alone in this world, exiled with nowhere to go. I don't know what I'm doing, or how I'm going to make a living. Can I really take her with me?*

Flio couldn't bring himself to agree. Surmising that this was the way of it, Fenrys turned her right arm into a wolf's. "Master, if you have truly made up your mind not to take me..." She brought her sharp claws to her own throat. "Then this is where I die."

Her right hand began to move, but Flio rushed to grab it. "I..." he said.

"Master?"

"I get it. You win. You can come with me. Just please don't do that again." His shoulders were trembling.

Seeing him like this, Fenrys was at a loss for words. *He really cares that much about me?* She returned her arm to its human form, staring at her new master.



A while later, the two had finally calmed down. They were sitting

together on a nearby boulder, Flio behind Fenrys, lost in thought. *I guess she managed to force herself on me. But if she's going to be coming along, how should I refer to her?* Flio had had enough bad experiences with speciesism in his home world—he didn't like the idea of treating Fenrys as a slave or a pack mule. *What would be the best way to bring Fenrys along without alarming people?*

As he was thinking, Flio glanced at the side of Fenrys's face.

"Is there something you need, Master?" she said, smiling when she noticed that he was looking at her.

At the sight of Fenrys's smile, Flio had an idea. "Fenrys," he began, "if you're okay with it..." He looked into her eyes, suddenly speaking very slowly and deliberately. "Would you...travel with me under the guise of a married couple?"

Fenrys went still.

"Ah, no," Flio said, worried that she had misunderstood, "I don't mean you have to be my wife for real, just... If that's what we told people, we might be able to travel without raising suspicion..."

As he was speaking, Fenrys suddenly wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "Of course I'll be your wife!" she said, her cheeks turning red as she wrapped her arms joyfully around him. "I'll be your wife for real! I get to be the wife of someone as strong as Master? Someone as kind as Master?!"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! F-Fenrys! Wait a minute!" Flio peeled Fenrys off of him, and looked into her eyes. "I'm not from this world," he said. "I was one of the Hero candidates they summoned...but I was deemed a failure and thrown away. I can't go back to my home world. I'm completely alone. I don't have anywhere to go, and I don't know what I should do next. You can't... You can't marry someone like me."

Fenrys took his hand. "I don't care," she said, looking straight at him. "I promised I would be your wife. I *want* to be your wife. Wherever you come from, I'm not going to change my mind." She smiled. "I swear my eternal loyalty to you. For the rest of my life, I swear to stay by your side. So, please let me be with you, Master—I mean, Husband."

For a little while, Flio just stared at her smile. Then he clasped her hand in his. "Really? You really want this?"

"I do," she said, nodding giddily.

Flio embraced Fenrys, holding her softly in his arms. Fenrys happily returned his affection.





Having pledged to work together as husband and wife, the two of them decided to spend the night camping in the forest. Flio considered returning to the city, but it occurred to him that the knight he had sent back with Teleportation would be there with her party. He thought it would be better to wait until the heat died down.

After walking a while in the forest, the two came upon a clearing suitable for a campsite and settled in. “Well, shall we spend the night here?” asked Flio.

“Very well, my beloved.”

The two of them spread a cloth over the ground, gathered dry sticks for firewood, and began preparing the clearing for a campsite. It was sunset before they knew it. They ate some of the rations from Flio’s Bottomless Bag for dinner and sat close together on a fallen log by the campfire.

“My husband,” said Fenrys, turning her gaze towards Flio, “if I may, I would like to service you tonight. As your wife.” She removed the clothes she was wearing and tossed them aside. Now naked, she nuzzled up to him.

“W-Wait, Fenrys... I, I haven’t had a bath today and...”

Fenrys interrupted him with a kiss. As her lips met his, she began to cast spells of passion on him, one after another—spells like Attract, Lust, Aphrodisiac...

You who would be my husband... Be my partner in both body and spirit.

She stroked and caressed his body as she kissed him, her magic taking effect. Then, pulling back from the kiss, she ran her tongue down his body, teasing...

Clink! Suddenly, the hollow sound of a spell breaking rang out, and her aphrodisiac magic vanished. Fenrys opened her eyes in surprise. “This... My lord, did you...?”

“I don’t... I don’t have much experience,” he said, interrupting her. “But...” He kissed her on the lips. Fenrys’s body shook with pleasure at the touch. His tongue was inside her mouth, toying with hers. For Fenrys it was like an electric shock—she felt like she was melting just from a single kiss.

She could feel Flio’s own passion magic flowing into her body. It was incomparable to the spells she had cast earlier. She was absolutely overwhelmed. “N-No, I... W-Wait...” Her face was bright red. She couldn’t resist this.

Flio quietly cast a spell and began to glow, his face and body transforming.

“What... What is this form?”

“This is my real body,” he said, gently embracing her. “I had kept it hidden until now because I was worried that people from the castle might be after me. But... I thought I should be like this for our first time.”

Fenrys swooned and blacked out in his arms.

When Flio had reached Level 2, he had mastered every skill and every spell that existed in the world. As it turned out, skills related to seduction or pleasure were no exception. The more he wanted to make love with Fenrys, the more his unrivaled skills of foreplay began to manifest, and the more his peerless sexual magic took effect.

Flio, however, was not aware in the slightest.

That night, with Flio as her partner, Fenrys would lose consciousness many, many more times.

◇The Following Morning◇

Fenrys was lying on her side, Flio using her arm as a pillow. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Her body felt heavy, and her mind was still foggy from sleep.

Flio noticed that her eyes had opened slightly. “Good morning, Fenrys,” he said.

Fenrys looked up at the face she had seen so many times last night under the bright moon, holding her, kissing her...

“My husband...” She clung to his chest, her breath hot. *My body... My heart... They are both yours.*

Resting against her husband’s chest, Fenrys once again closed her eyes.



Fenrys finally awoke in the late morning. She and Flio straightened up their clothes, and Flio turned back into his disguised form.

“All right,” he said. “What do you say we head to the city and get something to eat?”

“Oh, sure! I’ll gladly accompany you!”

The matter settled, Flio casted Teleportation, taking them back to the castle town. They arrived to find a noisy tumultuous crowd in the streets. Taking stock of their surroundings, they realized the townsfolk were rushing towards the castle gates. There, before the crowd, a truly impressive number of knights stood in formation, prepared to set out.

“Wow,” said someone, “that is a huge detachment of knights. What’s up?”

“It sounds like they found one of the Dark One’s followers in the

Delaveza Forest.”

“So all those knights are off to slay a demon?”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard!”

Flio smiled wryly as he overheard the conversation. *They’re talking about Fenrys, aren’t they?* he thought. He turned to look at Fenrys, clinging to his arm. “Shall we leave them to it and find somewhere to eat?”

The two of them were about to hurry away from the scene when Flio heard a familiar voice calling to him from a corner of the formation of knights. “Are you... Could you possibly be Sir Flio?”

Flio’s body went stiff. *Th-That voice...* Slowly, he turned his head to look. There, in the army, he spotted the knight and her companions from yesterday—the ones he had sent back to the city with Teleportation. They must have been part of the force being dispatched. When they spotted Flio, they darted out of formation, running up to him in joy.

“I knew it,” the knight said, clasping Flio’s hand tight with tears streaming down her cheeks, “I knew that someone like you would be able to get away from that monster. I’m so relieved to see that you’re safe...” Her whole party was standing behind her—the heavy soldier, the witch, and the archer—crying their eyes out every bit as much as she was. For a while, they just stood there, glad to see Flio alive.

Eventually, the knight’s eyes happened on the person hiding behind Flio—on Fenrys. “Tell me, Sir Flio,” she said, tilting her head to the side, “who is this woman? I don’t recall seeing her with you yesterday.”

Flio felt a pang of anxiety at her words. *I hope this doesn’t go badly...*

Fenrys was not the small girl she had been when the knight’s party had encountered her, but a young woman. And when they had faced off against her, she had transformed from a little girl directly into a full lupine. This form was one they had not seen before. It seemed they were unaware that she was the demon from yesterday.

After turning it over in his mind a few times, Flio faced the knight. “She’s with me,” he said, smiling. “She was waiting at an inn in town when we met yesterday.” Behind his smiling face, Flio was rushing through magic windows in his mind, bringing his spells into effect, one after another. Bluff. Concealment. Suggestion... Any spell he could find that would help prevent her from noticing...

Between his disarming smile and the absolute deluge of magic he was subjecting the knight’s party to, their dubious expressions relaxed. “I see,” said the knight, now smiling, “I’m sorry. I hope I haven’t given any offense.” She bowed her head, and Flio inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.

Fenrys tugged at his sleeve. "My lord," she whispered, "why didn't you introduce me as your wife? That was quite untoward." She puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

"You're right," he apologized quietly. "I'll tell them next time. I promise."

"B-By the way," he said, turning back to address the knight. "What is this army? You're with them?"

The knight turned to look back at the host of knights. "Oh, the army. We're being dispatched to the Delaveza Forest. The Dark Army has been stationed there for some time, threatening our kingdom. Now that we've learned that a demon from the forest has been coming to the castle town itself, King Klyrode has deemed that the matter can no longer be ignored. So, this army is..."

It seemed she had more to say, but just then, the crowd in front of the castle let out a great shout of joy.

"The Hero! The Hero has come!"

"He looks so commanding!"

"The Golden-Haired Hero! Save us, O Hero! Save our kingdom!"

As they continued their exclamations, the knight turned back to Flio. "Yes, that. The Hero is going to lead us." She nodded her head.

Flio looked towards the back of the host. There, riding on a white horse and wearing a suit of ornate armor, the golden-haired knight was slowly advancing as the crowd parted before him.

Oh, it's that guy.

It was the knight Flio had met before. The knight who had been summoned at almost the same time as him. There was no mistaking that golden hair. He was the hero who had gotten high ability scores from the very start—the hero worshipped by the crowd, celebrated at the Feast of the Hero's Advent that had lasted several entire days.

Well, I've changed my form with magic... He probably won't recognize me.

While Banaza had been exiled, the Golden-Haired Hero was being lauded by the people as the savior of the kingdom. Seeing the difference in their fortunes, complicated emotions sprung up in Flio's heart.

The knight turned back to him. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "Sir Flio, would you be willing to join us? If we say you're one of my retainers, surely nobody will take issue. Your magic would be a tremendous boon to our cause. You'll be compensated too, of course."

Flio, however, made an apologetic face. "I'm honored that you think so highly of my abilities," he said. "But I'm afraid I used up almost all of my magic power in the fight against that demon... I won't be of much use to anyone until I recover." He bowed in apology, but the knight rushed to console him.

“Oh, oh no, there’s no need to apologize like that,” she said. “I’m the one who owes you an apology, for inviting you so casually without making sure you were in good condition. Yes, after all, you were just in a battle with that horrible demon...” She nodded her head, flustered.

The knight and Flio spoke for a while longer, after which she returned to her unit. “When I return from this mission, allow me to thank you properly for yesterday!” She waved him goodbye. After she had left, Flio sighed in relief and exasperation.

It probably doesn’t need to be said, but the story Flio had told her about having used up his magic was, of course, a total lie. If he stood out in the hero’s forces and things went badly, it was possible they would discover he was still alive. He decided he had better not accompany the army, and came up with a lie on the spur of the moment.

As the knight left, Fenrys squeezed his arm tight. “What’s wrong?” he asked, concerned.

“I... I don’t know, really,” she said, casting her eyes downwards. “It’s just, when I saw you chatting so casually with that woman, I felt...miserable, in the pit of my chest...”

“I understand,” said Flio, gazing at her and giving her one of his smiles. “I’ll take care not to make you feel that way again.”

As the Golden-Haired Hero led his army to sally forth, Flio made his way towards the town center, Fenrys firmly attached.



Within five short days, the force the Golden-Haired Hero had led to sortie from the castle was utterly defeated and forced to withdraw without even encountering the Dark Army when they came under attack by a horde of psychobears—ferocious monsters known to attack humans.

There were many such dangers to the north of Klyrode Castle, even aside from the army stationed at the Citadel of the Dark One. It was not at all a place suitable for human habitation. This was why the Hero had gone south from the castle to train for his quest against the Dark One, where he only fought smaller groups of relatively weak monsters. He had finally been dispatched on his long-awaited mission to the Delaveza Forest, but on the road they had come under attack by a huge number of wild psychobears—maybe a thousand, even—and the Golden-Haired Hero panicked.

“Hero! Wh-What do we do?!”

“Golden-Haired One, command us!”

The soldiers waited for the Hero’s orders as they desperately fought back while on the verge of being overrun by the psychobears,

but he refused to take charge. “I-I’m not supposed to die like this!” he cried, already fleeing back towards Klyrode Castle. He was the first to break ranks.

The knights put up the best fight they could, but without their commander it wasn’t long before they were destroyed. Of the ten thousand who set forth from Klyrode Castle, only three thousand were to return.

When he heard the news, King Klyrode’s face went white. If it was known to the populace, he reasoned, that the man he himself had acknowledged as Hero had failed so utterly, it was not impossible that he might be held responsible. Therefore, he needed to suppress this. He ordered all records of the campaign for the Delaveza Forest to be expunged to conceal the fact that an army had even set out. He even forced the survivors of the massacre to sign contracts stating that they would not disclose what had happened to anyone under any circumstances.

In the midst of the cover up, he secretly called the Golden-Haired Hero to the castle.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

“Well, Hero, what is the meaning of this? You set out to strike at the Dark Army, only for your forces to be destroyed by common monsters?!” King Klyrode sat on his throne, crossing his arms and fixing the Golden-Haired Hero with a look of discontent.

“By your leave, Your Majesty, and speaking frankly,” the Hero said, taking a step forward and meeting the king’s smoldering eyes, “what is the matter with your soldiers? They fell to pieces at just the *sight* of the monsters! By the time I could do anything, the army was already basically destroyed. There was just no way I could have rescued all of them on my own, no matter *what* I did!”

For a while the king just stared back at him, and then he let out a great sigh. “Which is to say, that you claim the fault lies with my army.”

“Yes, exactly! It’s not my fault at all! In fact, you should be *thanking* me that as many soldiers made it out alive as there were!” His piece said, the Golden-Haired Hero turned his back to the king and stormed out of the throne room.

King Klyrode continued to sit, just watching the door the Hero had left through. At length, one of the aides to his side stepped forward. “Your Majesty, permission to report on the observations of the Hero’s activity?”

“*Please.*”

The aide leaned in to whisper in the king’s ear. “That Golden-Haired Hero... During his training this past month, he would only ever

challenge opponents he was sure to defeat. If anything posed even the smallest threat, he would run. And then he would go on tangents, blaming anyone else for his behavior, speaking rather unlike a Hero...”

The king knit his brow at the man’s words. “Then why,” he said, “did you not recommend he be placed in the dead center of the forces and have someone *fit for command* take the lead?”

“This also came up several times during his training,” the man said. “Many people tried to offer him advice, but he would always say, ‘This is just how I do things,’ and refuse to alter his behavior in the slightest. So the report says.”

The king sighed even more loudly than before, and shook his head. “We had no choice but to name him the official Hero, under the circumstances, but now that we *have*, we can’t accuse him of failure... All we can do is hope he hurries up and gains enough levels to defeat the Dark One.”

Saying this, he let out one final heavy, frustrated breath.



The Golden-Haired Hero walked through the halls of Klyrode Castle, fuming. His demeanor was calm, but inwardly he was full of impatience and rage. *Why is this happening?! he thought.*

He called up a window, displaying his ability scores:

Lv: 91
Strength: 999
Defense: 999
Speed: 999
Magic: 999
HP: 999
Skills: Pre-Mastery

His level had risen considerably, but his other abilities hadn’t grown in the slightest from what they were when he was Level 1. *I’ve been training hard for an entire month*, he thought, clicking his tongue as he continued down the corridor, so *why won’t my abilities go up? As I am, I can handle humans or weaker monsters, but it’s way too dangerous to take on anything stronger! I knew I should have refused to lead that army...*

A woman who seemed to be an attendant rushed up to him as he walked through the castle. “My Lord Hero!”

“Tsuya,” he said, glum. “Sorry to keep you.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” she said, following behind him as he walked. “It’s part of my duties, you know.”

The two of them were joined by a group of strong-looking knights

who surrounded them as guards. With their protection, the Golden-Haired Hero departed Klyrode Castle.





Flio and Fenrys returned to The Jewel's Blessing and spent the next two days hardly leaving their room. They would come downstairs to the restaurant for mealtimes, but after eating they would return straightaway to their room, firmly attached to each other, and stay there for the rest of the day.

The innkeeper watched as the two ascended the stairs, grinning in amusement. "Nice going, VIP," she said.

"Nice going'?" asked the dog demihuman waitress, a puzzled look on her face. "What are they doing in that room all day, Bao?"

The innkeeper snickered knowingly. "Bafuna," she said, "what do you *think* a man and a woman do alone in a room together?"

The dog girl—Bafuna—went red. "What? U-Um, you don't mean..." The innkeeper kept grinning as she watched Bafuna study her feet, fidgeting nervously.

The two lay together in their bed, Fenrys embracing Flio, naked beneath the covers. She was resting her head on his arm, eyes closed and breath hot as Flio gently stroked her hair.

"My husband," she cooed, "I've never been this happy before in my life..."

Flio gave her a hug. "Still," he said, "it's about time we start thinking about what comes next."

"What comes next'?"

"Yeah. Things like, where are we going to live, how are we going to make money..."

"I'll go anywhere as long as it's with you," said Fenrys. As she spoke, she wrapped her arms around Flio's shoulders. "But we can worry about that later."

Flio could tell what Fenrys wanted. Once again, he held her close.

◇Some Days Later◇

Having eaten their first meal of the day, Fenrys and Flio decided to head outside to walk around town a little.

"Are you ready to talk about it?" asked Flio.

"You mean, talk about what comes next?"

"We need to find a place where we can live an easy life together, and to do that we need to find work."

"An easy life together..." Fenrys repeated Flio's words, letting out a little bit of a laugh. "I'd never have considered such a thing before."

Flio smiled back at her. "Well, I'm going to do some

reconnaissance. Shall we try the Adventurers' Association first?"

Fenrys nodded, and the two of them walked along the crowded city streets, heading in the direction of the guild.

◇Adventurers' Association◇

They found the Association noisy with adventurers huddled together and whispering. They seemed worried about something.

"Hey, did you hear?" said one among the crowd.

"Oh, that rumor about the Hero's forces getting crushed?" said another.

"The Dark Army got them, huh?"

"I heard they couldn't handle some wild psychobears."

"No way. You're kidding?"

They continued on like this, talking mostly about the Hero's defeat. "That's hardly a surprise, with *him* in command," said Fenrys, just loud enough that only Flio could hear.

"You think so?"

"I do. The Golden-Haired Hero is fairly strong for a human, I suppose, but I don't think he would fare well against a demon. All I could sense in him was pride and vanity—not a trace of bravery, leadership, or intelligence." She glanced up at her husband. "If *you* had led them, no psychobear would have stood a chance. You would have annihilated them in the blink of an eye."

Flio smiled coolly. "I'm glad you think so," he said, "but if *he* couldn't do it, I don't see how *I* would fare any better."

"What are you saying?!" Fenrys shouted. "His strength is nothing compared to yours! Even I, Fen—"

Flio interrupted her, pressing his index finger to his lips. "We're in public, Rys," he said, smiling.

After cutting her ties with the Dark Army to follow Flio, Fenrys had decided to start going by "Rys" as a precaution. Even if none of the Dark One's servants were nearby, it wasn't impossible that some humans would know her by name. However, she still hadn't grown accustomed to the pseudonym, and almost referred to herself as Fenrys before Flio stopped her.

Embarrassed by her near slipup, Rys covered her mouth with her hand. "M-My apologies!"

"It's no big deal," said Flio. "Just act natural, okay?" He smiled.

The two of them made their way to the registration counter to register Rys as an adventurer.

"Humans have such interesting ways of managing information, don't they?" mused Rys, holding her new silver pendant before her eyes, examining it curiously.

"I have one too," said Flio, taking it off his neck and showing it to her. "Here!"

"So we have matching pendants," Rys murmured, putting her own around her neck. *Matching pendants with my husband...* Her cheeks flushed at the thought.

They were about to head to the board to see what jobs were available when the bell at the center of the guild suddenly rang out. A rabbit woman was behind the counter, ringing the bell and speaking with a loud voice that filled the entire guild. Almost every adventurer must have been able to hear her words. "Emergency request! A large herd of psychobears has been found to the north of the city! It appears that they are heading in our direction. All adventurers, please lend your aid against the monsters! While this is in effect, the reward for killing a psychobear will be increased to ten times the usual bounty."

The adventurers gathered in the guild began to chatter.

"Hey, you think that request is..."

"Yeah, it's gotta be the monsters that wiped out the Hero's forces, right?"

"I bet. I've never heard of large herds of psychobears in this part of the world."

"Ten times the bounty is good, but... Those things defeated an army!"

"I might go, but I'm gonna want a large party."

As the adventurers gossiped noisily, the rabbit woman continued. "This request is rank-free. Adventurers of any rank may participate. However, as this is considered an unranked request, insurance or provision funds are not available. The high reward is meant to compensate for this."

"Wait, it's unranked?!" whined one of the noisy adventurers.

"No insurance means they won't heal us if we get injured, right? Right?"

"That's just unreasonable."

"But...you can't just ignore that bounty."

The adventurers kept talking about this and that. Some of them, drawn by the reward, began to gather into parties, but the majority of the crowd showed no signs of moving. Their talk turned again to the topic of the Golden-Haired Hero.

"Isn't this sort of thing what the Hero is for, anyway?"

"Where is the Hero? What is he doing?"

"I heard that as soon as he got back, he set off for the south again."

"So he's running away? Not from the Dark One, but just some monsters?"

Flio headed out of the building as he listened to the adventurers'

conversation, Rys following along. When they were outside, he turned to her. "It sounds like well-paying work," he said. "What do you think? Wanna go hunting?"

"I can handle psychobears on my own," she said. "You should find somewhere to eat and wait for me to return, my lord." She looked like she really was about to dart off, but Flio stopped her, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, there's still a lot of magic I want to try out, you know? And I would feel bad about sending my wife off to fight on her own."

"Y-Your wife?!" Startled by that unexpected turn of phrase, Rys blushed furiously and froze in place. Flio was puzzled.

"Should I not call you that?"

Suddenly coming back to her senses, Rys urgently shook her head. "No! You should! It's... It's just that it's such an honor... I mean, such a joy..." Her face was as red as a boiled lobster.

"I'm happy to hear that," said Flio. "Then, are you ready to go?"

"Y-Yes, my husband!"

The pair nodded to each other and set off again down the street, this time heading to a weapon shop.

"I don't need a weapon to defeat the likes of a psychobear, my husband," said Rys, confused. "I'm quite strong without one." Flio smiled at her with his usual calm expression.

"I know you don't need it," he said. "But people might think it strange if we set out unarmed to hunt monsters."

"The humans would find that strange?" Rys glanced at the merchandise, a mysterious look on her face. It didn't take her long to make a selection: a shortsword, on the small side. As a lupine, she had absolute confidence in her speed. Flio already had a staff in the style a magic-user might use, but he also bought a new longsword, which he strapped to his back. His plan was to use magic to fight, but he wanted to make a display of being armed. By strapping it to his back, he could do so while keeping his hands free.

"And, um, this is just a trinket, but..." He handed Rys a ring that he had purchased along with the longsword. It was enchanted with a few minor skills related to speed.

"I don't think skills on this level will make much of a difference," said Rys, eyeing the ring suspiciously, but Flio took her left hand in his.

"Among humans, it's customary for husbands and wives to wear rings on their left hands," he said. "As a symbol of their bond." As he spoke, he slipped the ring on her finger. Rys looked, and saw that Flio was wearing an identical ring himself.

"A symbol of our bond... Our...marriage?" Rys held up her hand, blushing deep as she gazed at the ring Flio had given her. There was

no such custom among demons, and hearing the meaning of the gesture made her flush with bewildered joy.

“Do you not like it?” Flio asked, noticing the shocked look on her face. “You can take it off if you prefer...” But Rys quickly turned her head up to look at him.

“What?! No, never! I-I want to keep it on!” Her voice was quite a bit louder than she had intended, loud enough that the other customers in the store looked curiously in their direction. Rys held up both of her hands to cover her bright red face, hiding from the gazes of the people around her.

Wh-What is wrong with me, she thought, casting her gaze down, still hiding her face in her hands. *I’m getting flustered so easily...*

Flio wrapped an arm gently around her. “My apologies for the surprise,” he said. Keeping his head down, he led Rys out of the store.



With their new weapons in hand, Flio and Rys headed for the north with a mind to take on the emergency request from the guild. There was an incredible array of armed guards standing watch at the north gate, readying themselves for the psychobears to attack.

“Excuse me,” said Flio, approaching. “May I get through here?”

A number of guards moved to block their way. “Didn’t you hear? The area past the gate is full of psychobears right now.”

Flio smiled calmly at the guard obstructing him. “We know,” he said. “We were just heading out to go psychobear hunting.” The guard gave him a look, and sighed.

“Maybe you’re after the money, but between you and me, you had better give it up. The two of you would just be going to your death. If you really insist on hunting psychobears, at least find some more adventurers to go with you.”

One of the guards was laughing. “What morons,” he said, voice full of scorn. “Where do idiots like that keep coming from? Where do they get off thinking they can take on monsters like that?”

Rys clicked her tongue and lowered her stance, ready to strike the man down where he stood, but Flio put a hand on her shoulder and whispered in her ear. “Rys, leave it. It’s fine.”

“But my lord...”

“It’s fine. We haven’t proven ourselves as adventurers yet.”

“But...”

“Leave it.”

At her husband’s repeated words, Rys slowly and reluctantly stood down. Looking her over to make sure she wasn’t about to attack anyone, Flio turned his attention back towards the guard.

“My understanding was that the psychobear extermination request

was rank-free. We should be allowed to join, correct?" He held up his pendant, showing it to the guard, signifying to him that he was an adventurer with the Association.

"Well, yes, that's true, but..." The guard's expression darkened as he looked at Flio's pendant.

The guard captain walked up to them as they had their exchange, looking the pair over. "If they want to go, let them," he said. "We gave them a warning. Whatever happens is on their heads."

"If you say so, Captain." The guard who had been cautioning Flio stepped back. After making sure everything was in order, the guard captain turned towards Flio.

"Nothing more to say, I suppose. Do your best out there. Maybe you'll get lucky and take down a psychobear between the two of you."

The guards opened the gate, and Flio walked through, Rys following along. He turned to smile at the captain. "Thank you, sir," he said. "We'll see what we can do. Maybe we *will* take one down." The gate closed behind them.

"Are those two going to be okay?" a guard muttered idly to himself.

The captain smiled grimly at his words. "Of course not," he said. "The psychobears are going to eat them alive. If they're lucky they *might* make it back, but I'll be shocked if they return unharmed."

"What a pity," said another. "And such a good-looking woman too... He could have at least left *her* behind for us." A few of the guards snickered crudely at the remark, but the captain furrowed his brow, annoyed.

"Enough chatter," he said, commanding the guards in a loud voice. "Get back to your positions. There's no telling when the psychobears are coming, so stay on your guard!"

The guards obeyed, and returned to their stations.



It wasn't long after leaving the city that Flio and Rys encountered a group of psychobears.

"Looks like we've found their vanguard."

"My husband," said Rys, readying herself to attack, "If I may..."

Flio held up his right hand to stop her. "Would you mind letting me have these ones?" he said, stepping forward. "I want to get a sense of how powerful my magic is."

"If that is your will." Rys didn't seem quite satisfied being denied a chance to fight, but she obediently stepped back.

"Now," began Flio, facing the psychobears, "Let's start by seeing what happens when I use this much force." He extended his right arm towards his target and cast the spell Gravitation.

The psychobears could tell something was off. They began to wander aimlessly, confused, making noises like “Grawoowl?!” and “Graah!”

“Not much of an effect,” said Flio, watching closely. “Now, let’s see what happens when I use *this* much.” He increased the power of his spell. The next moment, the psychobears collapsed at once to the ground and the sick sound of bones snapping filled the air. The squashed psychobears looked for all the world like fur rugs spread out over the ground. Naturally, they died instantly.

Flio looked disappointed at what he saw. “That’s too *much* force,” he said. “This is pretty hard to get right.” He scratched the side of his head with his right hand.

Beside him, Rys was staring at the dead psychobears with evident awe. *A psychobear’s bones are as hard as steel, and he flattened them like it was nothing.*

“Now,” said Flio, “we have to get the trophies back to the city somehow...” He thought for a while before remembering. “That’s right! I forgot I had a Bottomless Bag.” He placed his hand on one of the dead psychobears, willing it into the bag...but nothing happened. The corpse remained where it was on the ground. “Hm? Why didn’t it work?” Flio tried again, with the same result.

“My lord,” said Rys, “it may be that the Bottomless Bag has certain restrictions. It may not be possible to place the corpse of an animal inside.”

“Oh?” said Flio, looking at the bag. “They have settings like that?” He sounded impressed. “So that means we need to think of another way to transport the psychobears.”

Flio looked once more at his bag, double-checking its contents for something he could use to carry a body. He saw that there was a cart among the agricultural tools he’d been given, and quickly brought it out. It was fairly big, as it was meant to be used for farming. “This will do, I think,” said Flio, loading it up with the psychobears’ remains. As he finished up, he moved towards the front of the cart, meaning to pull it by its metal fixture, but Rys had gotten there first, ready and eager.

“I will take on this duty,” she said. “I insist.”

“W-Wait, I can’t make my wife do something like that...” Flio started, but no matter what he said, Rys continued to assert that she be allowed to pull. Eventually, he yielded, and Rys took to her job with zeal. She pulled happily, simply glad to be of use.



A little farther, right before a thick forest, the two came upon a house. Behind the house was a cultivated field, but whatever had

grown there before seemed to have been set upon by the psychobears. It was a miserable sight.

The house itself, by contrast, seemed surprisingly unscathed. The interior was in a bit of disarray, but it seemed less the work of monsters, and more the traces of the residents fleeing in a hurry. "What's this?" said Rys.

"We might be able to use this house," Flio mused. "Hopefully the owners won't mind."

"Use it?"

"Rather than hoping we run into groups of psychobears like before, it might be more efficient to use this house as a base and patrol the area around it."

"I see," said Rys. "I understand your reasoning." The two cleaned up a little of the mess, and set out to hunt.

It wasn't long before they found a pair of psychobears. The monsters detected their presence and charged, letting out a terrible roar.

"My lord," said Rys, "please allow me to handle it this time." Not waiting for an answer, she got into a fighting stance, transforming just her fingertips into wolf claws. She kicked powerfully at the ground and leapt into the fray, diving within the reach of a psychobear. She was much too fast for the monsters to follow. "Hah!" She rent the beast's neck with her claws, slashing it open with a single strike. The psychobear fell to the ground with a dull thud. Its partner received similar treatment. The whole fight was over in a matter of seconds.

The two continued easily dispatching any psychobears they came upon—Rys with her claws and her incredible speed, and Flio using mostly the spell Gravitation, although he branched out into experimenting with spells like Magic Cannon and Ripper. Before the day was even halfway over, they had felled almost twenty psychobears between them.

"Our stamina is fine," said Flio glancing at the cart, "but..." The cart was loaded with a veritable pile of psychobear remains, so much so that it was creaking ominously. *I think the cart's about at its limit.* Flio cast Reinforce to strengthen the cart, and turned to his wife. "Rys," he said, "the cart's full, and it's starting to get late. Shall we return to the house?"

"If that is your will," said Rys, stepping to his side.

Suddenly sensing something, Flio turned to look at the forest. "Hm?"

"A psychobear..." said Rys. She, too, could feel its presence. "It seems to be alone." She readied herself as the psychobear appeared from the woods. For a little while it idly looked around the area, until it spotted Flio and Rys. Baring its claws, it charged forward. Rys

walked calmly towards it, transforming her fingertips back into claws. "Come, then," she said, casually lowering herself into a fighting stance. She was overflowing with killing intent.

And then, something strange happened.

The psychobear, hurtling towards them, roaring, fangs bared, came to a sudden halt in front of Rys and simply keeled over backwards.

"What was *that*?" asked Flio, thoroughly puzzled.

"I...don't know..." Tilting her head in confusion, Rys stared at the fallen psychobear. The two walked up to it. Its arms and legs were splayed out to the side, as if it was trying to show that it had been defeated.

"Maybe it realized it's no match for you, Rys," said Flio.

"That's...admirable, in a way?" The two looked at each other, then laughed. "What should we do with it? We certainly can't just leave it here."

Flio folded his arms in thought, when the bear suddenly clambered up to its knees. It faced them, and began to prostrate itself, again and again. Flio couldn't help himself from smiling at the sight. "Any interest in a pet?" he proposed, turning towards Rys. The psychobear made a noise. It sounded happy. Rys, too, found herself grinning in amusement.

Flio cast Subjugation, binding the psychobear to him on the spot. Otherwise, there was a risk that the monster would turn aggressive and start attacking people. An iron collar appeared around its neck—the symbol of its bondage. Like this, it would be perfectly safe accompanying them into the city, but Flio was still concerned. A large bear like that would obviously stand out on the city streets. It was very likely that someone would misunderstand the situation and report it to the guards.

Eventually, Flio thought of a solution: "Why don't we give it something to wear?" He took all of the outfits from his bag and combined and transformed them using magic to create a set of psychobear-sized overalls. He handed them to his new pet, who happily put them on. Dressed like that, it completely lacked the menacing aura of a psychobear. It looked like it could be some sort of bear-type demihuman. "Walking around shouldn't be a problem like this." The psychobear cheerfully nodded.

"We should give it a name, shouldn't we?" Rys folded her arms. Flio also hummed and hawed in thought.

"Well, since it's a psychobear," he said, "how about something like Sybe?" He looked back and forth between Rys and the bear.

"An excellent name," said Rys. "You truly are brilliant, my beloved." Sybe jumped up happily.

Flio and Rys returned to the house they were using as a base, bringing their new pet along. Rys had made to pull the overfull wagon, but Sybe moved in front of her, seeming to say, "Leave it to me." Rys let Sybe pull the wagon, which it did happily all the way to the house.

"It's getting late," said Flio. "Let's stay the night here and head back to the city tomorrow morning."

"Then, allow me to prepare something for us to eat," said Rys, heading into the kitchen.

While she was busy, Flio cast spells of sealing and preservation on the wagon. That way, the corpses threatening to spill over its sides would remain fresh the following day, and their bloody stench wouldn't stink up the whole house. Next, he created a magic wall around the perimeters to keep out any of the area's roaming psychobears that might happen upon the house in the night.

He had just finished the wall when he heard Rys calling from inside the house. "Dinner is ready, my lord!"

"Okay!" he called back, "I'll be right there!" He and Sybe (who had been following him around) went back to the house for dinner.

As Flio came up to the kitchen table, what he saw made him tense up unconsciously.

"What is the matter, my lord?" Rys looked curiously at her husband as she took her seat. Before them was a platter loaded up with enormous slabs of raw meat.

"Rys..." uttered Flio, visibly nervous. "What in the world?"

"This is the fruit of our hunt—fresh psychobear meat. Is something wrong?" She looked up at him, genuinely confused.

Flio forced a smile as he looked back at Rys. "Yes... Yes, I see..." he said. "Um, speaking personally, I prefer my meat...cooked?"

"You do? Then...shall I cook it for you?"

"Yes, please. I'd very much appreciate it."

Rys picked up one of the slabs of meat and brought it back to the kitchen. "It seems like a waste, though," she muttered as she seared it in a frying pan. "Such fresh meat really should be eaten raw..."

That piece is too big to cook like that... Flio thought, still forcing a smile. *Most of it is still going to be uncooked...*

Behind him, Sybe was devouring one of the slabs of psychobear meat like it was the best thing it had ever tasted. If it knew that this was cannibalism, it didn't seem to be bothered in the slightest.

◇The Following Morning◇

Flio roused from sleep and stretched mightily in bed. Rys, lying beside him, slowly opened her eyes.

"Good morning, my beloved," she said, draping her body over his

and kissing him tenderly. The two lay like that for a little while, cuddling naked in the light of the morning sun as it filtered in through a gap in the curtains.

After Flio had finished putting on his clothes, he cast the curtains open. "Good weather today too," he said. Then, "Hm?"

"Is something the matter, my husband?" Rys walked up beside him, still in her undergarments. She followed his gaze outside, and saw a number of psychobears wandering around outside Flio's barrier, staring at the house.

"I wonder if those were the ones who ruined the garden," Flio mused. "Maybe they've got a taste for fresh produce."

"I can take care of them, my lord," said Rys, making for the door without bothering to put on proper clothes, but Flio called after her to stop.

"Wait, Rys, there's no need," he said, pointing out the window with his right hand. Suddenly, the wandering psychobears fell at once to the ground, perfectly still.

"Was that Gravitation?"

"It was. I've gotten a pretty good handle on that spell thanks to yesterday's practice," said Flio. He had used just enough force to kill the monsters, without flattening them into psychobear pancakes.

Rys smiled. "Well then, I suppose I should prepare our breakfast," she said, and began towards the kitchen.

"Rys," said Flio, "tell me, what are you planning on making?"

"Oh, more psychobear meat. The same as last night. Why?"

Flio once again forced a smile as he spoke. "Why don't I cook this time," he said. "You just get dressed and wait. Okay?"

"Indeed?" said Rys, a curious expression on her face. "Very well..." She did as she was told and retrieved her clothing from where she had left it at the foot of the bed. While she was busy, Flio prepared a meal with astonishing speed. When Rys returned to the kitchen, she found the table set with a great number of plates and bowls filled with all kinds of food: rice, vegetable stew, a fresh salad, and psychobear meat cut thin and fried with vegetables.

"And this is for Sybe," said Flio, treating their pet to a heaping plate of psychobear meat. This wasn't anything like the raw meat Rys had served last night—it was cut into thin strips and skillfully fried. Sybe began to greedily devour its food, clearly even happier with it than it had been with the meat last night.

Flio made sure Sybe was eating its meal without complaint, and then he turned to his wife. "Shall we dig in as well?" He sat down in the seat in front of Rys, but Rys herself was frozen stiff.

"My... My lord husband..." she said, stunned. "This meal... How...?"

“Mm? Oh, the vegetables are from the garden in the back. It’s in a sorry state but there was still a lot there that was edible. And I found the rice in the pantry and decided to cook it up. What’s wrong?”

As Flio spoke, Rys began to panic. Born and raised a soldier in the Dark Army, Rys had been thoroughly schooled in swordplay and martial arts, but nobody had ever taught her how to cook. There were only two recipes she knew: meat (raw), and meat (cooked).

Rice? she thought, her eyes darting all over the table. This fluffy white stuff is made from rice? And this soup... How did he make the water taste like vegetables? Even the meat seems like it’s been flavored somehow... It tastes much better than when I do it.. Rys took a bite of Flio’s cooking, and then another, deep in thought. *If I’m going to cook for my husband, I’ll need to cook food like this...*

Beads of nervous sweat ran across her brow as she enjoyed the meal.



After their meal, Flio, Rys, and Sybe stepped out into the woods. Flio felled a tree with magic and shaped it into a large cart—much bigger than the one they had been using. They transferred the trophies from yesterday and the psychobears Flio had finished off just this morning onto the new cart. There were almost forty bodies to move, but thanks to Flio’s magic the work went fast.

Like before, Sybe went to the front of the cart, seemingly insisting on being the one to pull it. It flexed its muscles for them, posing like a bodybuilder. Flio and Rys both grinned at the sight. “Well then, Sybe,” said Flio, “take us to the city!” Sybe let out a happy roar.

The cart had been magically reinforced to hold the mountain of corpses without any issue. Normally, when slaying a beast or monster, it’s enough to bring its right ear back for proof of the deed. Psychobears, however, were not only considered a delicacy for their meat; their hard bones could be used as materials for armor or weapons, and their pelts made good cold-weather gear suited for northern climates. Because they were valued so highly, adventurers could claim a higher bounty if they returned with the undamaged body.

The guards couldn’t believe their eyes when Flio’s party reached the city gates. “You got *how* many psychobears? In *one night*? Just the two of you?!” The guard captain who had seen them off yesterday was there, regarding the mountain of psychobears piled up on their cart with wide eyes, completely bewildered. The others could only stare as the cart passed into the city.

At the Adventurers’ Association, a crowd gathered around Flio’s cart. “That’s...an incredible amount of psychobears.”

"I'm pretty good with magic," said Flio, smiling calmly at the cat-type demihuman girl who came out of the building to confirm his kills. "And my wife is a strong sword fighter."

"We'll assess the value of these materials for you, so would you please hand me your pendants?" She looked between Flio, Rys, and Sybe.

"Oh, Sybe is our pet, not an adventurer," said Flio. "I have it under Subjugation, so there's no danger of it attacking people." As he spoke, he removed his silver pendant from around his neck and handed it over. Rys did the same.

"In that case, could I ask you to register your pet? A beast that size isn't supposed to be in the city without an official record of its owner, just in case something happens." The girl handed Flio a piece of paper, labeled "Pet Owner Registration Form." The bottom half of the page was a list of notices and guidelines, such as: "In the event of an incident involving a registered pet that results in the injury of a citizen, the pet may be executed with no right of appeal," and "Owners are liable for any damages caused by a pet registered under their name." Flio filled out the various fields on the form's top half, signing his name at the bottom in the field where it said "I accept all terms."

Just to be safe, Flio wrote "bear" in the field for "pet species." It seemed like entering "psychobear" might prove unwise.

"That's all for your registration," said the cat girl. "I'll add Sybe's information to your pendant's data." She took the form and the pendants to the back of the reception area. It seemed like it would take a while to assess their kills, so Flio, Rys, and Sybe took a seat.

While they were waiting, a different cat girl came by, carrying a teapot on a tray. "You must be terribly strong," she said, smiling as she set out cups of tea for them. "I had no idea there were people out there who could take down so many psychobears."

"Oh," said Flio, smiling wryly, "we just got lucky." He took the cup of tea in his hands and continued. "But I wanted to ask... There's an unoccupied house right before the forest to the north. You wouldn't know what happened to the people who lived there, would you?"

"Everyone in that area evacuated when the psychobears came, I think," she said.

Flio thought for a little while before turning his attention back towards the girl. "We had the idea of using the house as a base for hunting psychobears in the north. Would that be allowed?"

"I'll have to check," she said. "There have been a lot of monster incursions recently. It would be a big help to have strong adventurers like you making a base up there." She hurried back behind the counter.

Flio finished his tea and sat chatting with Rys as he waited for the girl to return. It didn't take long at all before she came rushing back. With her was an old demihuman man, another cat-type. He seemed to be her superior. "That's them," she said, introducing them to him. "Mister Flio and his party, the ones I was telling you about."

"Mister Flio," the man said, bowing. "My name is Leolith. I am the head of accounting for the Adventurers' Association. Mimew here tells me you were asking after an abandoned house. We just finished checking with the town hall; it seems that the house's former residents themselves have already declared it abandoned. We took the liberty of claiming the house for the Association, and registered your names as its current occupants. Please use it as you see fit. The Association will handle all of the fees and paperwork. All we ask is that you keep up your splendid performance." Leolith and his subordinate Mimew both bowed deeply.

"There's no need for all that," said Flio. "I can at least pay the fee for you." But Leolith shook his head.

"No no no, I insist. We're more than happy to help the ones who hunted so many psychobears for us. Please allow us to do you this small favor." They argued back and forth like this for a while, but in the end Flio yielded to Leolith's generosity and accepted the free house.

That matter dealt with, Leolith signaled to the Association staff waiting behind him, who placed two large bags on the table in front of Flio. Leolith smiled, indicating the bags in turn. "In that bag is your bounty. The guild recognizes your extermination of thirty-nine psychobears. Ordinarily, slaying an A-Rank monster would earn you 10 gold per head, but due to the special extermination request, the bounty for psychobears has been increased tenfold to 100 gold each, totaling 3,900 gold. In addition, you are owed a bonus for returning the carcasses intact. Your bonus comes out to 780 gold. I trust everything is in order?"

The Adventurers' Association divided monsters by rank, and paid bounties on this basis. A-Rank bounties included psychobears and cyclopes, and were worth ten gold. B-Rank included the likes of dark spiders and lizardmen, and paid one gold. C-Rank bounties, such as evil worms and vampire bats, were five silver, and slimes and goblins were D-Rank bounties, paying a single silver coin. Of course, monsters that had earned A-Rank or B-Rank bounties were considered difficult opponents. Usually it was very large parties, or several parties working together, who attempted them.

Flio and Rys, by contrast, had brought back 39 A-Rank bounties by themselves. The staff and the assembled adventurers at the Association were watching them with amazement. When they heard

the size of the bounty for the defeated psychobears, the adventurers began to stir.

“They killed *how* many bears?!”

“That’s the biggest bounty I’ve ever seen...”

They gathered around Flio’s party, all gossiping loudly about them.

This might get annoying if we stay for much longer... thought Flio. He gave Rys a look and stood up. “A pleasure doing business,” he said, thanking Leolith and his subordinates, and left the Adventurers’ Association behind him. Rys followed closely behind, understanding from his look that he wanted to leave in a hurry.

“Waoor!” Further behind, Sybe ran after them, swinging its large body.

The Association was abuzz with noisy conversations. Leolith and his group were staring at the door Flio’s party had left from. “I’ve heard that the Golden-Haired Hero has gone to the Southern Stronghold and cut off all contact with us,” said Leolith, shaking his head and sighing deeply. “If only *they* had his job. That Flio would make a much better Hero.”

After taking their leave of the Adventurers’ Association, Flio and Rys departed the city straightaway, their pet Sybe pulling the empty cart behind them. It wasn’t long until they arrived at their house—their new official residence. Their first task was to put the place in order. The previous residents had fled in a hurry when the psychobears came, leaving the interior in disarray. They had done some minor cleaning when they stayed overnight the previous day, but Flio was ready to do some serious tidying up. He used magic to deep clean all the rooms at once, and sorted the kitchenware and utensils, throwing away any he deemed unusable. Any garments that had been left behind, he put in his Bottomless Bag. It wasn’t long before the place looked completely transformed—sparkling, immaculate, and pristine.

“Okay,” said Flio. “This will do for the time being.” Rys looked up from where she had been crouching and wiping the floor with a rag, and gave him a smile. “Now we just need to do something for Sybe.” He glanced out the window at the psychobear, who was hard at work scrubbing the exterior walls.

Flio went into the forest, felling trees and shaping them with magic. Next, he destroyed a section of the wall. He attached the wood, joining it to the wall itself to extend the floor plan, enlarging their living room. With the leftover wood, he built a pen in one corner.

“What do you think, Sybe?” he asked, bringing Sybe inside to see its new living area. “I laid some straw out on the floor here for you.” At Flio’s urging, Sybe slowly entered the pen. At first it wandered

around, sniffing curiously at everything, but before long it made a happy cry of approval. Flio and Rys joyously watched on as Sybe giddily paced in and out of the pen over and over.

“All right,” said Flio. “Sybe can sleep down here, and we can take one of the rooms upstairs. Though... Even if we each take a separate bedroom, there’ll still be one left,” he mused. “That just means there’s room for our little family to grow bigger.”

“Bigger?” echoed Rys, blinking. “Who are you thinking of inviting?”

“That’s not quite what I mean,” said Flio, smiling sweetly as he placed a hand on Rys’s belly. “Just...if we ever want to have a baby...”

Her face went bright red.

◇The Following Morning◇

The three left early in the morning to go hunting. Sybe followed behind Flio and Rys, making cheerful growls as it pulled the cart.

“I don’t believe there are any psychobears left near the house,” mused Rys.

“We hunted a lot around here yesterday, didn’t we? All right, then let’s try deeper in the forest this time.”

Flio led his companions into the woods. The people of the city avoided these woods, regarding them as dangerous. Sure enough, Flio and co. had hardly set foot inside when they came upon groups of monsters. Psychobears aside, there were many A-Rank monsters who’d made their homes here—monsters like the salamanders and cyclopes that came out to attack them as soon as they took note of their presence. But even this level of monster was no threat to Flio and Rys. They had made short work of the psychobears yesterday, after all. They slew them one after another, and Sybe heaved their enemies’ remains onto the cart.

Rys looked dissatisfied as she ripped open a cyclops’s windpipe. “Prey this weak makes for a poor warm-up,” she said. Behind her, Flio was casually taking down yet another.

The cart was full up before noon, so they headed back to the city with Sybe pulling the cart as always.

◇The Adventurers’ Association◇

“Wha?! You brought us this many today too?!” Mimew’s eyes went wide as she stared at the mountain of monster remains presented before her. The adventurers inside the building, too, thronged onto the street and gathered around to look.

“Those two go psychobear hunting again?” questioned one.

“Outta this world...” another marveled in awe.

“Is that a salamander? Didn’t one of those things drive off a troop of knights just last year?”

“They took it down on their own?!”

As people gossiped noisily around them, the guild staff took the cart for assessment.

As soon as the cart was out of sight, Rys turned to address her husband. “Excuse me, my lord,” she began. “May I be permitted to wander the city, at least until they have finished their assessment?”

“Of course you can,” said Flio. “Would you like to go together?” She shook her head. “I...” she started, trailing off. “There is...a private matter I must deal with. I do not wish to trouble you with this.”

“Hmm...” Flio frowned. “All right. I’ll wait here with Sybe, then.”

Rys bowed deeply. “My beloved husband,” she said, “thank you for indulging my selfish request.” Alone, she turned to leave.



“Here it is,” Rys muttered to herself, staring at the building in front of her. “The place Mimew told me about. To think I would be made to endure such shame... But, it is all for the sake of my husband...”

Rys stepped foot inside the Mileno School for the Culinary Arts.



Flio was relaxing in the Adventurers’ Association with Sybe as he waited for Rys to return when Leolith appeared with a number of guild staff. “Mister Flio,” he started, “my apologies for the wait.” He handed over another bag. “Psychobears still give a ten-times bounty, of course. Furthermore, one of the monsters you brought us was wanted by the kingdom. Its prize of one thousand gold has also been added to your reward.”

““Wanted by the kingdom?”” Flio repeated.

“Indeed. This salamander dealt a great deal of damage to the kingdom’s knights a year ago.”

“Oh,” Flio said, mildly surprised, “I see.” He recalled testing out the spell Windcutter on a giant salamander, slicing it into eight pieces with a single blow. *Really? That salamander was supposed to be dangerous?*

Rys arrived right as Flio finished collecting his earnings.

“Welcome back, Rys! Your timing was perfect. I was just—” but Flio was suddenly taken aback. “Rys! What happened to you?!” Something had ripped and torn her clothing. There were smudges on her face, cuts all over her arms and cheeks. “Don’t tell me—you were attacked? Was there a monster?!”

“A-Ah, I,” she sputtered. “N-No, it wasn’t a monster.” Worried, Flio quickly tended to Rys using recovery magic.

Rys cast her eyes downward. *I never imagined that cooking was such a formidable endeavor...*

◇One Month Later◇

The family of three had settled into a daily routine. In the morning they would hunt, and then they would bring their full cart back to the Adventurers’ Association for a reward, then idle around the city for a while before returning to their house.

Sybe was a very personable psychobear, and before long it had become an object of adoration for the local children. One would see Sybe pulling its cart behind Flio and Rys and cry out, “It’s Sybe!” summoning more children from all over to come gather around them. Sybe was always happy to let them ride on its back.



“My lord... Once again, I must take my leave.” Rys faced Flio and bowed, and then turned to set out towards the city streets.

For the past month, she had been diligently attending daily classes at the Mileno School for the Culinary Arts, studying the very basics of cooking while Flio waited for the Adventurers’ Association to complete their assessment.

The school was full of young women; Rys was among them, peeling vegetables with a deadly serious look on her face. Mileno, the teacher, came over to her and beamed proudly. “You’ve improved quite a lot, Miss Rys,” she said. “I can hardly recognize the girl who couldn’t peel a potalpo without breaking it into little bits.”

“O-Oh! Thank you, Miss!” said Rys, bowing deeply. *This is more fun than learning to use a sword was*, she mused to herself, a smile creeping onto her face as she returned to her practice. *I wonder why?*

◇The Adventurers’ Association◇

Her lessons finished for the day, Rys returned to the guild.

“Hello, Rys! Welcome back. I just finished collecting our earnings,” said Flio, holding up a bag for her to see. “Shall we find somewhere to eat before heading home?”

“Forgive my forwardness, my lord, but may I prepare supper for us today?”

“You want...to cook?”

“I do. Is that acceptable?”

“All right,” Flio answered. “Then let’s buy the ingredients you

need and head home.”

Rys cheerfully nodded her head, happy to have permission. Eventually, the two would come to settle on a system where Flio and Rys would trade off cooking duties from day to day, but that’s a story for another time.



A few days later, Flio and Rys were on their way home from their regular trip to the Adventurers’ Association when they suddenly heard sounds of battle nearby. Flio turned his head. “I think it’s coming from over there.”

Flio and Rys moved quietly towards the sounds, and came upon a knight and her party fighting against two psychobears and losing badly. They were putting up a valiant effort, but the monsters were far too strong for them. Together there were four: a knight, a heavy soldier, an archer, and a witch.

The two in back—the archer and the witch—seemed to lack combat experience. They were standing around panicked and confused, unsure how to support their comrades. The psychobears would charge through and attack those two if they were given any chance, so the knight and heavy soldier were exclusively focusing on defense, and were unable to counterattack effectively. *Wait*, thought Flio. *That knight...* He felt like he recognized her from somewhere. Then it hit him. *That’s the group that attacked Rys back when I first met her!*

Rys seemed to have noticed as well. She was glancing at the party with a subtly hostile expression. “I see no need to involve ourselves in this,” she said. “Let’s leave these people and go home, my love.”

Flio mulled over Rys’s words. There was no doubt in his mind that if they left, the knight and her party would be destroyed. “I mean,” he said, feeling guilty, “they’re people I know, at least a little bit...” Hidden in the shadow of a tree, Flio began to chant and invoked the spell Lightning. It struck with a loud thunderclap.

“What was that?! What’s going on?!” Startled by the sound, the knight began looking all around her.

“Hey...” said the heavy soldier, pointing. “Hey Balirossa, look...” Before her, the two psychobears who had been attacking them were lying collapsed on the ground, charred black.

“What in the world...?” The knight, Balirossa, stared at the dead psychobears, uncomprehending.

“W-Well, whatever that was... At least we’re saved, right?” the archer uttered, speaking slowly. Beside her, the witch wordlessly fainted.

Flio gave a quick check to make sure that none of the knight’s

party were injured, then quietly left.

“My lord, you are much too kind,” pouted Rys.

Flio grimaced. “Oh, please don’t be like that... Look, let’s just go home and enjoy your delicious cooking.”

“Okay...” said Rys. “I’ll do my best.” The two of them hurried home, engaged in a somewhat awkward conversation.

When they arrived, they found two psychobears burnt to a crisp outside the house. “That trap is incredible, isn’t it?” admired Flio. Lately, he had been supplementing the magic barrier around the house with a trap spell. If anyone were to draw near, the barrier would activate first, preventing them from entering. And if it was a monster who activated the barrier, it would immediately be struck with a Lightning spell. Flio, Rys, and Sybe, of course, were designated as exceptions by the barrier, and could approach freely. Flio began moving towards the dead psychobears to clean up, but Sybe got there first. It ran forward with a “rawhr!” and began loading them onto the cart. “Thanks for the help, Sybe,” said Flio, patting the psychobear on its head. Sybe rumbled happily, almost like a cat purring.

While Sybe was bringing the loaded cart to the back of the house, Flio and Rys brought the ingredients for cooking and other items they had purchased in town inside. They were in the middle of their preparations when Flio’s detection spells picked something up. “Hm?” Focusing, Flio sensed a number of humans approaching the house. Flio gasped in surprise when he saw who it was: that presence could only belong to the knight he had just saved and her party. He went outside, tilting his head in curiosity. *Why are they coming here? What do they want?*



A look of surprise came over the knight’s party as they caught sight of Flio standing outside the house. “You... S-Sir Flio?!”

Flio regarded them with his usual cool smile. “What brings you all here?” he said. “This is a dangerous place to wander about, with all the monsters.” He opened a section of the barrier, allowing the knight and her party to come in.

“It’s...a shameful matter, I’m afraid,” said the knight, stiffening up as she faced Flio. “I would very much prefer if you didn’t repeat this to anyone.”

Nonetheless, she began to explain her situation. “Perhaps you’ve heard, but some time ago the Hero’s army met a group of psychobears in battle and was destroyed. The Golden-Haired Hero was terribly angry—he shut himself in the Southern Stronghold, and still refuses to come out. It seems he sent a letter to His Majesty, saying, ‘Although

my abilities are phenomenal, the soldiers meant to support me are altogether useless. I refuse to attack the Dark One until they are of a high enough level to be useful as my right arm.' His Majesty summoned all of his knights and commanded us to 'train until we can at least handle a psychobear,' as he put it." She hung her head and sighed deeply. Her party nodded their heads affirmatively.

"The plan was for the highest-level knights to take priority in training. They could do it faster, you know?" said the heavy soldier, folding her arms. "But they all begged to be taken off training, saying they were needed to 'secure the castle.' Even a high-level knight is gonna have trouble with a psychobear. I guess in their minds, falling in battle against the Dark One is one thing, but they don't want to die training against some monster..." She inclined her head forward.

The archer, standing next to her, continued the story, gesturing with both hands. "And then? Thanks to the Hero's army losing to the psychobears? Lots of people started thinking stuff like, 'Wow, the Golden-Haired Hero's pretty weak,' right? So like, people are saying they don't wanna throw away their lives for a Hero like that." She hung her shoulders.

Next, the witch picked up the thread, stepping forward and facing Flio. "And that's why weaklings like us are out here..." All four of them sighed at once.

"Among all the knights and their companies, we are the freshest batch," said the knight, looking Flio head-on despite her humiliation. "Of course, we haven't been neglecting our training, but even so, as we currently stand we could not defeat even a single psychobear between the four of us. Not long ago we had the bad luck to encounter *two* of the beasts. There was absolutely nothing we could do against them, but just as we were on the verge of annihilation, they were suddenly struck by lightning." She pursed her lips, as did her companions.

It looks like they haven't realized that the lightning bolt was my spell... Flio thought, looking over the knight's party. He resolved to keep quiet about it.

"By the way, Sir Flio," said the knight after she'd spoken a bit more, "what brings *you* to this forest?"

"Oh, this house was abandoned by its former occupants, so we bought it for ourselves." Flio smiled coolly, turning to face his house. "My companion—no, I mean, my wife and I have been living here with our pet bear, hunting monsters to cover our living expenses. We've been here for an entire month, come to think of it..."

The knight's eyes went wide. "E-Excuse me? Y-Your...*wife*? Sir Flio! You're... You're *married*?!" She sounded betrayed, like this was some personal affront. The heavy soldier prodded her on the side and

she seemed to return to her senses.

What's wrong with me being married? Flio glanced at the knight, confused. He had no idea what had caused her to behave that way, so he simply kept forcing a smile. The knight seemed like she was still in shock, so the heavy soldier spoke in her stead. "We actually came here because we thought there was an abandoned house in the area. We were done in pretty bad by those psychobears, and we thought it'd be a good place to rest. I mean, I don't fancy camping with all the monsters about." Saying this, she craned her neck towards Flio. "Hey, Flio, I get that I'm being super impertinent, but can we stay here for a bit? We'll be happy even just staying in the shed. Don't wanna be a bother to you or your wife."

Flio hemmed and hawed for a moment, and said, "It's all right with me, but wouldn't you rather I send you back to the city with Teleportation?" But at his words, the party's expressions seemed to darken.

"Oh, yeah, that would be great!" said the archer. "But we're not supposed to go back until we've gotten results, y'know?" She sat down heavily.

Next to her, the knight nodded. She seemed to have finally calmed down. "Our orders from the castle were to return having improved...or not return at all. If we can't at the very least defeat a psychobear between the four of us, we will not be allowed back." She sighed.

At this point, Rys stepped out of the house, smiling. "I suppose then that the two of us had best sleep in the living room tonight, my beloved," she said.

"Really? You're fine with it?"

"Of course I am. It wouldn't do for us to ignore people in need," she responded, and gave another smile. "If my husband says it is all right, then as his *wife*, I must abide by those words. Yes—as his *wife*." She put an unnatural amount of emphasis on the word *wife* as she spoke.

Rys must be happy that I introduced her properly as my wife this time! thought Flio, gazing at her. Last time he had chanced upon the knight's party among the Hero's forces, he had simply said, "She's with me." He recalled that this had upset Rys rather badly.

Flio and Rys showed the knight and her party into their house. They entered, politely thanking the couple.

But as they stepped into the living room, they stopped in their tracks, staring wide-eyed at Sybe. "What?!" exclaimed the knight. Sybe was sitting in a corner of the room, wearing overalls and playing with a ball. The party cowered before it, knees shaking in fear. "Is that...a psychobear?!"

"No... What's one of *them* doing *here*?"

The knight and the heavy soldier rushed to draw their blades, but Flio stepped in front of them, standing beside Sybe with a casual smile. "There's no need to worry," he said. "This psychobear is our pet. Its name is Sybe." He affably clapped Sybe on the shoulder. Sybe struck a pose, flexing with both arms, and then lay down on its side like it did for the children in the city.

"Your...pet." The knight's party sat down feebly, afraid to move, cold smiles on their faces.

"Aha ha... W-Well, I guess it's kinda cute."

Rys served the party tea, and they gradually seemed to calm down. One by one, they introduced themselves.

"My name is Balirossa," said the knight. "My family... Well, you could call them nobility, but in truth that would be in naught but name. Fallen nobility, if you will. As the eldest daughter, I have devoted myself to chivalry, in hopes that I may one day restore our fortunes."

"And my name's Blossom," said the heavy soldier. "You can probably guess, but I'm a heavy armor knight. Don't take me lightly for being a woman! I built up these muscles working on my family's farm. I got to know Balirossa when we were classmates at the knights' academy, and we've been together ever since."

The archer spoke next. "Oh, um, I'm Byleri? I'm, like, an archer? I was a stable hand at the castle, but I'm pretty skilled, right, so they asked me to go with the army? At some point they gave me a bow to use... Anyway, I'm, like, totally a newbie. Um. Nice to meet you!"

"Belano..." said the witch, bowing politely. "I'm a witch..."

After they made their introductions, Flio saw to the party's wounds, healing them with magic. "By the way, Belano," he said, "You use magic, don't you? Do you not know any healing magic?"

"I-I'm a defensive magic specialist," she replied, embarrassed. "That's the only kind of magic I can do..."

I hope that wasn't rude to ask... Flio pondered. He faked the best smile he could, and addressed the whole party. "Regardless, you've had a rough day, haven't you? How about we all have some dinner? Get some rest."

Blossom raised her right hand to speak. "Actually, there was something I wanted to say... We don't want to be any bother to you two, so we'll be fine sleeping out... Huh?" Her eyes drifted towards the window, when she saw something that made her recoil in shock. Outside, there were two psychobears charging towards the house. But as they drew near, they seemed to reach some sort of barrier, unable to come any closer. The next instant, a lightning bolt struck with terrible violence: Flio's magic trap. It hit the two psychobears, charring them black where they stood. Slowly, they fell to the ground.

“F-Flio,” said Blossom, slowly, “Does that...happen a lot?”

“It does,” Flio responded, matter-of-factly. “Usually when we wake up there are five or six of them out there, caught by the trap.”

It took a moment for Blossom to respond. “L-Like I was saying... We’ll be fine sleeping in just the very edge of your living room, but would you mind if we stay indoors?” She bowed several times, fervently entreating them.

After dinner, Flio turned towards Balirossa’s party. “All right, let’s get your beds ready,” he said, moving in the direction of the window.

“Sir Flio, are you truly going to let us sleep in your bed?” said Balirossa, “We will be happy to sleep on the floor so long as we have cushions...” But as she was speaking, Flio faced the forest and cast a spell. Tree after tree fell, but they never hit the ground. They danced through the air, moving towards Flio’s house. With each movement of his hands, a tree would split into usable wood, assembling itself in no time at all until they had become four wooden bed frames. Flio brought them inside with magic, and set them right next to Sybe’s pen. Rys knew her husband well enough to anticipate that he would make beds for their guests, and had already gone to the back room to retrieve four padded cushions. As Flio set the bed frames down, she placed the cushions on top as mattresses. Balirossa’s party, meanwhile, was stunned silent by the spectacle of beds being created by magic before their eyes.

“These beds are for you,” said Flio. “Rys and I will be sleeping upstairs. Don’t hesitate to knock if you need anything!”

The four women thanked Flio and tucked themselves into bed as he and Rys went upstairs to sleep. They were extremely tired from their ordeals, and Blossom, Byleri, and Belano were asleep and snoring as soon as they got into bed. Only Balirossa lay awake, a huge grin on her face, her eyes gleaming.

To be reunited with Sir Flio like this... It must be the will of the gods. He uses such powerful magic like it’s nothing! If I could make him part of my household, it might not be so impossible to reverse my family’s fortunes. Him being married is an unforeseen setback...but I also have the option of bringing him into my family as a mage retainer. It doesn’t matter how precisely, as long as I can bring him into the fold. I’ll stop at nothing!

Still grinning, she pulled the covers up over her head and started giggling relentlessly underneath.

Inside its pen, Sybe tilted its head as if to say, “What’s that about?”

◇The Following Morning◇

When Flio came downstairs in the morning, Balirossa, who had

been cleaning the floor, grinned widely and walked up to him. “Good morning, Sir Flio! I’m sorry to bother you so early, but I have a request...”

“You do? What do you need?” Flio looked inquisitively at the knight.

Balirossa smiled amiably at Flio. “I was wondering if you might see fit to instruct the four of us in the ways of combat?”

“You want...instruction?”

“Yes. It brings me great shame to say it, but we simply lack the strength we need. As things stand, we will never become strong enough to slay monsters. We could seek instruction at the castle, but we were told not to return until we had grown stronger on our own...” Balirossa’s eyes were glimmering as she spoke. She drew closer to Flio. “Under the circumstances, we would deeply appreciate your instruction. We would even welcome any harsh discipline you could contrive if it could train us to be stronger.” She bowed deeply. The other three ran forward and bowed alongside her.

“I understand, but... Well, we have to do our morning hunt...” Flio folded his arms in thought, when Rys walked up to him in high spirits.

“Is there any problem with bringing them along, my lord? They can assist us! Perhaps it can serve as practical exercises for them.” Rys had been inordinately cheerful ever since Flio had introduced her as his wife the day before. Even now, she was grinning as she spoke.

“We’ll do our best not to get in your way,” said Blossom, bowing again. “Please, we need your help.”

“Well, if Rys wants to bring you along, I’m not going to contradict her,” said Flio. And so, he reluctantly found himself accepting their request.

◇Some Time Later◇

Flio and Rys, as well as Balirossa’s party of four, set out for their usual hunting spot of late deep in the forest to the north, with Sybe following behind them pulling the cart. It was difficult to navigate with everyone together, so they decided to split up. Flio took Balirossa and Blossom while Rys took Byleri and Belano to carry out their hunt separately.

◇The Adventurers’ Association—Midday◇

“Today’s a little on the small side, isn’t it?” Mimew was craning her neck looking over Sybe’s cart. On most days their trophies would be piled higher than Sybe’s head, but today there were hardly any.

“There were some...special circumstances we had to deal with today,” said Flio, straining to keep a smile on his face.

“I see... I suppose even you have days like that.” Mimew was assessing their kills as she spoke.

Flio and Rys decided to grab a late lunch at a restaurant in town after they were done with the guild. They left Sybe, happily chewing on a chunk of meat, outside with the cart. Before long, a crowd had started to gather, chattering happily and looking at Sybe.

“Flio and Sybe are so cute, aren’t they?”

“Look, it’s really enjoying its meat!”

“Sybe always cheers me up.”

Sybe, it seemed, was gradually becoming the city’s idol.

The mood inside the restaurant was much less cheerful. Rys sighed heavily where she sat facing Flio. “Those two... I had no idea they would be so miserable at this,” she said, and sighed again.

“Was it really that bad?”

“‘Bad’ hardly begins to cover it,” Rys said, and began to relate the events of the morning’s training.

She started with Byleri. First, when they encountered a psychobear, Byleri hid in the shadow of a tree and loosed an arrow at the monster, but the arrow just bounced off its hide and fell harmlessly to the ground. The psychobear hadn’t even noticed that it was hit—it just kept walking. That was how weak her shots were. The psychobear had simply wandered off, unaware that it had ever been under attack.

Byleri was only equipped with a normal shortbow, so it was no surprise that her arrows lacked the power to pierce a psychobear’s thick skin. At first, Rys had assumed that she must be planning on enchanting the arrow to give it enough force to hurt a psychobear, but as she watched, Byleri simply fired a normal arrow with her normal shortbow to absolutely no effect.

“Is there a reason you aren’t enchanting your weapon?” Rys asked.

Byleri looked surprised at the question. “I-I, um, can’t use any magic?” she said. Rys went white.

“Without an enchantment, that bow isn’t going to do anything,” Rys said, and handed the girl a crossbow she had brought along. But Byleri was unable to even lift the weapon.

“Um... Miss? This is, like, too heavy?”

As for Belano, Rys had asked her what kind of spells she could cast, and the witch began to count them off on her fingers. “Defense-boosting spells... Status recovery spells... Barrier spells...” At first Rys had thought that it was a fairly impressive number, but as Belano continued to list them off, she gradually began to feel a sense of unease.

“Belano, defensive magic is all well and good, but could you tell me what attack spells you know?” Belano went silent, and seemed to freeze in place.

She stood there for a while, frozen, until finally she said a single word: “None.” Rys once again went white.

Belano told her that she could use defensive magic on par with an A-Rank spellcaster, but no matter how hard she tried she hadn’t been able to master a single offensive spell. Moreover, the amount of magic power in her body was uncommonly low, and she could only cast a few simple spells before running out. “It sucks,” she said, looking like she was about to vomit. “This whole situation sucks...”

Rys sighed deeply as she finished her story.

“It sounds like you had a rough time,” Flio said. “But you know... Balirossa and Blossom were something else.” He smiled bitterly as he launched into his account.

Balirossa was as skilled with a sword as one might expect from a fighter of noble birth, but she would insist on announcing herself to the psychobears, wasting time with preliminary remarks like, “Come! I shall be your opponent!” Moreover, every time she would swing her sword, she would go into unnecessary poses, like she was doing some fanciful sword form. Her skills were not suited to a serious battle with life and death on the line, but stage-fights and martial arts exhibitions.

Psychobears would attack her while she was still announcing herself, and she would be forced to flee, shouting, “Wait! C-Coward! This is *not* chivalrous conduct!” Even when she was lucky enough to finish her entire introduction and strike the psychobear with her sword, her stage-fighting techniques were unable to scratch its hide.

Blossom, meanwhile, fought using a greatsword befitting a heavy soldier that was the length of her body, and attacked the enemy directly using her entire body to deliver a strike with fairly impressive destructive power. However, her habit was to strike downwards using the momentum of her blade, a technique that had absolutely atrocious accuracy. Psychobears were faster than they looked, and had no trouble avoiding her attacks. In fact, over the course of the entire day, she had not landed a single hit. In fact, many times her foes would attack her while she was cutting through empty air, and she would be forced to drop her sword and flee, shouting, “Wha?! Idiot! Wait until I’m ready to attack again, you coward!”

Flio and Rys both had to devote their efforts to saving their charges from getting themselves killed, and as a result fell behind their usual pace. When they finished relaying their stories to each

other, both heaved powerful sighs.

“This is going to be more difficult than we thought, isn’t it?” said Flio, but Rys shook her head.

“It’s not that it’s *difficult*, my lord,” she said, sighing again. “It’s clear that they have *no* potential *at all*. If I had known, I would never have urged you to take them on...”

◇ Flio’s House ◇

Flio, Rys, and Sybe returned home once more. When they had left for the city Balirossa and her party were passed out in their beds, exhausted from fighting the psychobears, but when they opened the door, they were greeted by a grinning Balirossa wiping the floor clean with a rag. “Welcome home, sir! Welcome home, madam!” she said, interrupting her cleaning to welcome them properly before she got back to work. “I hope you will allow us to do at least this much to repay you for your kindness.”

Blossom was in the garden behind the house (which Flio and Rys had never bothered putting in order from being ransacked by psychobears), tilling the soil. She was swinging the hoe like an expert, preparing the earth for cultivation. “I come from a farming family, remember?” she said, smiling. “This kind of work is my specialty!”

Byleri was outside too. It seemed like she had been helping Blossom with her work, but when Flio and Rys checked on her, she was resting under a tree, exhausted from the heavy labor. She must have really been trying to put some muscle into it.

Belano was poring over the grimoire she carried in her own Bottomless Bag, diligently reading every chapter on offensive magic and repeating various exercises.

Flio and Rys glanced at each other. It seemed like the four were doing their best to make themselves useful or else training to compensate for their weaknesses. “I suppose there’s no harm in taking a few more people along on our hunts,” said Flio.

“I suppose not,” said Rys. “They really are doing their best...such as it is.”

And so, Flio and Rys resolved to look after Balirossa’s party for some time longer.



Flio and Rys continued to bring Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano along on their daily hunts. As the days wore on, they began to encounter gradually fewer psychobears and had more opportunities to fight other monsters, especially cyclopes. Balirossa’s party did their best, but they still were no match for the monsters, and Flio and Rys

would be forced to clean up after them every time without fail.

“Still, you’ve gotten quite a bit better from how you were at the start,” said Flio.

“Truly?” said Balirossa, beaming gleefully at the praise, “It gives me great pleasure to hear that.”

“However,” said Rys, “that is only speaking comparatively. Don’t forget that not one of you has been able to fell even a single monster.”

The four redoubled their efforts, spurred on by both the criticism and praise.

◇Klyrode Castle◇

“Oh?” King Klyrode raised an eyebrow at his aide’s report. “And they work for the Adventurers’ Association in this city, you say?”

“Indeed,” said the aide. “It seems that they live by a forest known to be inhabited by monsters, where they hunt dozens of A-rank bounties a day.”

The king made a throaty noise as he turned the information over in his head. Then, he lifted his gaze towards the aide and said, “Very well. Send a message to the Adventurers’ Association. Have it known that I would like to employ these adventurers as mercenaries under the direct employ of the kingdom. They will work as the Hero’s subordinates in the interests of Klyrode.”

“Understood, Your Majesty. Your will be done.” The aide bowed once and hurried out of the room.

The king watched the aide leave, let out a deep sigh, and then turned his head to look out the window. In the distance past the castle walls, he could see a fortress nestled in a mountain pass. Even now, the Golden-Haired Hero was shut up in that fortress, refusing to emerge. *Perhaps now the Hero will be willing to resume his duties.*

Ever since his forces had been destroyed by a horde of psychobears, the Hero had refused to step a single foot outside. King Klyrode had sent message after message urging him to do battle against the Dark One, even humbling himself in supplication, but the Golden-Haired Hero simply would not listen, even refusing to meet with the King.

“I will not,” the Hero had proclaimed. “Not until you give me an army made up of soldiers that can take on some psychobears.” The king was trying to fulfill the Hero’s conditions, but neither the knights nor the guards had yet sent him a message that they were ready. And so, as a final resort, the king at last entertained the idea of employing mercenary monster hunters for his army.

◇The Southern Stronghold◇

“My Lord Herooooo! Perhaps you’ve had enough to drink.”

“I don’t want to hear it! Tsuya, didn’t the king order you to see to my needs? Then do as I say!” The Golden-Haired Hero passed the cup he was holding to his attendant Tsuya who was sitting next to him. She reluctantly filled it up with alcohol. All around them were an array of plates of food, bottles of liquor, and an incredible amount of fresh fruit. The Hero laughed uproariously. “Tsuya, you should eat some too. The king gave us all these gifts to try to get me to go fight the Dark One! There’s no reason to hold back!”

“Oh...” said Tsuya, clearly distressed. “You...don’t say.” Once more she refilled the Hero’s cup. The Golden-Haired Hero had been living an extravagant life holed up in the fortress. He had been sending demand after demand to the king: for liquor, for food, sometimes even for women—anything he could think of to make his life comfortable.

King Klyrode had no desire to allow the Hero to continue his indulgent lifestyle, but was afraid of the repercussions of crossing the man he himself had appointed as the official Hero. Some in the castle were of the opinion that they should strip the Golden-Haired Hero of his title and give it to a newly summoned Hero Candidate, but the king was afraid that if they did so, the people would hold him responsible for appointing the Golden-Haired Hero in the first place. Therefore, he kept silent and acquiesced to the Hero’s demands, reasoning that he could do nothing but wait for him to set out on his quest.

◇Klyrode Castle—The Following Day◇

“Your Majesty,” the aide said, “We’ve received a reply from the Adventurers’ Association...”

King Klyrode sprung up from his throne in excitement, grinning expectantly... “Oh ho! Already? Then, when are those adventurers coming to the castle? Hm?” But the aide hesitated. He looked like he had swallowed a bug. “Hm?” said King Klyrode, again, his smile undaunted. “Do they want money upfront? That’s no matter. I hereby give permission to pay them however much they ask.”

The aide, however, seemed to have broken out in a cold sweat. Slowly, he opened his mouth to speak. “W-Well... Actually, the adventurers in question seem to have...refused.”

“They *what?!?*” The king was incredulous.

“I-It seems that they were ‘not interested.’”

“How... How can that be? They’re nothing but adventurers! They could earn far more money, and far more fame in our employ! How could they *not* be interested...” King Klyrode grumbled, then sat for a while in silence.



Flio and Rys were on their way home, having received their regular payment from the guild. "Was it truly wise to refuse the offer from the castle, my beloved?" asked Rys.

"Oh," said Flio. "That." He smiled coolly. "Remember how I was driven from the castle as a failure? I might have used magic to change my appearance, but even so, I'd rather not go back there if I can help it."

Rys folded her arms and shook her head. "I don't understand what's wrong with the people at the castle," she scoffed, disbelieving. "To deem *you* a failure..."

"But that blond guy they made the Hero... He had really incredible ability scores. I couldn't have beaten him in a million years."

"You mean when you were Level 1? As you are now, my love, you could defeat even the God of the Underworld, let alone the Dark One."

"Hey, hold on, Rys," Flio said, laughing. "I think you're giving me a little too much credit!"

Rys gazed lovingly at her husband. *My beloved*, she thought, *for all your strength you remain modest, never boastful... Truly I have married a wonderful man.*

"What's the matter, Rys?" Flio said, noticing that she was staring at his face.

"Nothing!" said Rys, drawing closer. "Nothing at all!" The two of them continued home, Rys clinging affectionately to Flio's arm.

Chapter 3: The Shadow of the Dark One

“Impawssible...” Uliminas the hellcat, confederate of the Dark One, stared at the forest before her, troubled.

She had come to the Delaveza Forest on an inspection. The forest lay south of the Citadel of the Dark One, right on the border of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. For that reason, the Dark One had entrusted it to the strongest of his Infernal Four, Fengaryl the Wild Wolf. Fengaryl and his minions were meant both to defend against any attacks from the Klyrode army and the new “Hero” that rumors said had been summoned, and also to conduct espionage against the kingdom. It had been some time, however, since Uliminas had received a scheduled report from Fengaryl’s forces.

It was Uliminas’s duty (and great honor) to coordinate the activities of the Infernal Four. At first, when she hadn’t received word from Fengaryl, she had assumed that the wolf was busy with espionage work, perhaps having gone to Klyrode Castle himself. However, nearly two months passed with no word, and she began to think that there was no avoiding the conclusion: something was *wrong*. And so, Uliminas set out for the Delaveza Forest to see for herself what had taken place.

Areas where the Dark Army were stationed would inevitably become polluted with the malicism emitted from demons—even more so for demons as powerful as Fengaryl and his fearsome underlings. However, nowhere in the Delaveza Forest could Uliminas sense a single mote of malicism. The only noise she could hear was the occasional birdsong. It looked for all the world like a completely normal forest.

Uliminas could sense the presence of the psychobears and cyclopes they had been sending south to stymie the Klyrode army, but as for Fengaryl himself, or the lupines that made up his core fighters, there was no trace.

“Come mew think of it,” Uliminas mused, “the monsters we’ve sent this way have been dying off fast... Purrhaps there’s a connection there?” Thinking it warranted investigation, the hellcat made her way south with all haste.

It had been almost a month since Balirossa and her party had begun to lodge with Flio. Each of them had spent the time making progress in her own way.

◇Blossom's Case◇

Flio whistled in astonishment as he looked out at the back garden. "Incredible..." Thanks to Blossom's hard work, the tattered remains of a field had turned into a splendid garden.

"Nah, it's no big deal. It's just that the earth here is pretty good," said Blossom, laughing heartily. "I think I got a bit carried away."

But as Flio looked over her handiwork, he couldn't help but think that her time working the fields also meant that she was neglecting her sword training. He gave a thin, strained smile.

◇Belano's Case◇

Flio created an enchanted ring to increase the magic reserves of its wearer to help Belano with her core issue. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Oh, wow... Yeah, this is a whole lot more magic." Belano was happy at first, but before long things took a turn for the worse. "I... I don't feel so good..." she said, and then she heaved violently, expelling the contents of her stomach all over the floor.

It seemed that her body couldn't quite handle the amount of magic power granted upon her. Flio adjusted the ring to lower the amount of magic so that Belano's body could gradually acclimate to her increased reserves.

Belano was admiring her new ring when a voice came from behind her, dark as if it was seething up from the very bowels of the earth. "Heed my warning, girl," it said. It was Rys, who had silently crept up from behind. "That's a splendid ring you have there...but if you should ever wear my husband's gift on your left hand's ring finger..."

Belano went white and obediently put the ring on her right middle finger.

◇Byleri's Case◇

Flio also made an enchanted ring for Byleri to supplement her poor arm strength enough to use a crossbow that could penetrate a psychobear's hide. For several days after, she went into the forest to find animals to practice marksmanship on, but there was a problem.

Byleri stared at the horned rabbit at the end of her bow, her arms shaking. "Umm, Miss Rys?" she started. "Do I really have to, like,

shoot the bunny?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Rys. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s just...the bunny’s way too cute? I feel, like, sorry for it, y’know? I just... I just can’t...”

Rys was dumbfounded. “Excuse me?”

Since small animals didn’t seem to be an option, Byleri fixed a target to a tree growing outside Flio’s house, and practiced exclusively on that. She was in the middle of training when she happened to glance happily at the ring of strength on her finger.

“Heed my warning, girl,” came Rys’s voice from behind her. “That’s a splendid ring you have there...”

◇Balirossa’s Case◇

Of the four, Balirossa showed by far the most improvement. Under Flio’s tutelage, she learned to reduce her unnecessary flourishes, and became considerably better at delivering solid cuts. A-Rank monsters were still beyond her, but as she stood, it would not be out of the question for her to take on a B-Rank.

No sooner had Flio begun to take notice of her improvement, however, than Balirossa started acting strangely. She seemed to be playing the part of a helpless damsel, although Flio could tell that she was attending closely to his line of sight. Flio, for his part, had no idea what was on her mind and could only incline his head in confusion at her behavior. Rys, on the other hand, thought she had some idea. This had all started the day after Flio had given Belano and Byleri their rings, after all... *That conniving... She’s trying to get a ring from my husband!*

Rys took over Balirossa’s training from Flio, and she quickly gave up the damsel act.



What a purrculiar group they are.

Uliminas had come south through the Delaveza Forest, and was now spying on the activities in Flio’s house from the forest. *Those four meowver there training aren’t anything special...* she thought, her eyes fixed on Flio. *But that man...*

One of Uliminas’s abilities enabled her to see a person’s status and abilities at a glance. But no matter how hard she tried, Flio remained completely opaque. *Even the Dark Meown can’t block me like that...* Uliminas hid behind a tree. She could sense a powerful barrier around Flio’s house. *I could disguise meowself as a human...* she thought, considering ways to draw close to Flio. *Or maybe...*

Uliminas was startled out of her thoughts by a voice coming from

the direction of the house. "I was wondering who was watching us... Uliminas, is that you? What are you doing here?"

Uliminas looked in the direction of the voice. Suddenly, her troubled expression gave way to pure shock. There before her stood the younger sister of the Infernal Fengaryl. "Fenrys?!"



Uliminas was still uneasy.

"I'm afraid it's meager hospitality," said Flio, "but please enjoy." Rys had introduced Uliminas to her husband as "my colleague in the Dark Army," and Flio had insisted on inviting her inside where he then treated her with goodies.

Uliminas eyed the tea and pastries in front of her with suspicion. *Did he poison these...?*

"Uliminas," said Rys, smiling dangerously as she regarded her former comrade, "is something the matter with the tea my lord husband has so kindly prepared for you? You suspect poison, perhaps..."

"No!" Uliminas shouted, scrambling to drink it up. "Never! Not even a little bit! Thank you so meowch!"

Meanwhile, Balirossa's party was watching from the shadows, hidden behind a pillar.

"Is that..." said Balirossa, "one of the Dark One's..."

"Gods above..." said Blossom. "What do we do?"

"Ha..." laughed Byleri. "Aha ha ha..."

Belano said nothing. She had fainted.

The four of them were huddled together in their hiding spot, shaking violently. Uliminas, who was quite aware of their presence, lowered her head. *Yeah... she thought, that's what mewsually happens when a normal human sees a demeown up close...* She returned her gaze to Flio and Rys, who were sitting in front of her, smiling. *Fenrys is a demeown...although I guess she's calling herself Rys now. But why is this Flio so relaxed? He's a human, isn't he?*

What troubled her even more, though, was Rys. The Fenrys that Uliminas knew had nothing but contempt for humans. She delighted in their slaughter, calling them "inferior lifeforms." But the woman in front of her calling herself Rys seemed not to have a speck of killing intent as she sat by Flio, gazing at him with an adoring smile on her face. But if Uliminas even so much as thought of making any kind of suspicious movement, Rys would fix her with a look of such murderous intensity that it froze her blood. *I can't afford to meowss around here...* she thought, clicking her tongue as she turned her attention to Flio.

"Mew know," she began, "there have been some big changes

around here lately, especially in the Delaveza Forest.”

“Oh, that.” said Flio. “That’s my fault. I didn’t really know what I was doing, and I carelessly cast the spell Purification... It seems like Rys’s brother got caught up in it...”

“Don’t blame yourself, my beloved,” said Rys. “It’s his own fault for falling so easily, even though he was one of the Infernal Four.”

Uliminas was stunned silent by what she was hearing. *Hold on... He “carelessly” destroyed Fengaryl’s army? A-And with Purification! Isn’t that meowne of the strongest spells in existence?!*

“Wait!” said Balirossa, still hiding behind the pillar. “Sir Flio did what to an Infernal?!”

“I can’t,” said Blossom, “I seriously just can’t...”

“Aha?!” cackled Byleri. “Aha ha ha ha ha ha...”

Belano said nothing. She was still unconscious.

Those four are really starting to get on my nerves, thought Uliminas, failing to hide her irritation.

Flio and Uliminas continued for a while to chat idly about nothing important, until Uliminas made to leave. “Well,” she said, “I should probably be going. I’m in the middle of a mission, mew know? But first, I’d like to ask mew a favor...”

“You do?” asked Flio. “What is it?”

“Would mew mind sparring with me? I’m very interested in seeing how I purrform against someone even Rys couldn’t handle.” Uliminas smiled amicably. She had an ulterior motive, however: a sparring match might give her the chance to eliminate a potential threat to the Dark Army.

Rys cut into the conversation. “My husband, you mustn’t!” she exclaimed.

Meow?! Of course Rys could see right through me... Uliminas clicked her tongue, and shifted her weight onto her legs so that she could run away at any time.

“This woman is after your body!” said Rys, pointing an accusatory finger at Uliminas. “She means to use a sparring match as a pretext to grapple with you!”

“What?! Why would I—!” Taken off guard by Rys’s skewed perspective, Uliminas lost her balance and fell.

Flio smiled wryly at their exchange. “Sure,” he said. “I’m fine with a sparring match.”

Uliminas flashed a devilish grin, cracking her knuckles as she schemed. She had already devised a strategy for their match. Flio, her opponent, was too strong to face head-on... *But with my spell, Toxic, I can send poison through the ground beneath his feet!*

The two faced off outside the house. “Whenever you’re ready,”

said Flio. He didn't draw his sword, nor did he begin casting defensive magic—he simply stood nonchalantly, as if nothing special was happening. Uliminas would have preferred it if he *were* on guard. His lack of defense only made him seem more threatening.

"All right," she said. "Purrrpare yourself!" Uliminas launched herself off the ground, flying high into the air. But this was a feint. The instant before she took flight, Uliminas had sent the spell Toxic through the ground itself. As her magic moved underground to attack Flio, she took to the sky to draw his attention away in an attempt to eliminate any chance of him noticing.

"Poison magic from underground, huh?" Flio was completely unfazed. As he spoke, the Toxic spell coursing fast through the earth shattered with a hollow "clink!"

"Wha—?!"

It took Uliminas a moment to realize what had happened. She wasn't the Dark One's confederate for nothing, though. Realizing that her attack from beneath had failed, she began the incantation for another spell. Countless poisonous snakes appeared out of both her outstretched hands, one after another, attacking Flio from all directions. But Flio simply raised his hand, and Uliminas's magic snakes scattered and vanished with the same "clink."

"Let's not use poison, okay?" said Flio. As he spoke, Uliminas's body was frozen in midair, held in place by some unseen force. She couldn't move. Thanks to the pressure binding her, even breathing was difficult. Uliminas couldn't even make out what had happened to her. "I'd have no trouble avoiding them," Flio continued, "but if one of those things happened to fall on Rys or Balirossa's gang, we might have a bit of a problem."

"I *am* capable of defending myself, my lord," said Rys.

"Yes, but it's the principle of the matter," Flio said, firmly. "I wouldn't want to send poison your way if I can help it."

"*H-Honestly...*" Rys blushed bright red, too flustered to meet Flio's eyes.

As Flio and Rys were speaking, Uliminas, held fast in midair, succumbed to asphyxiation and passed out.

"Sorry about that. I really overdid it," Flio said, apologizing to Uliminas for both losing his temper over the poison attacks, and for continuing to press his own spell until she lost consciousness.

"N-No need," said Uliminas, her voice shrill. "It was my fault! Don't worry ameowt it!" She took off with some hurried goodbyes to Flio and Rys, looking for all the world like she was running away. *Meowly hell...* she thought as she ran. *That man was something else! The Dark Meown needs to hear about this...* She set off in the direction of the

Citadel of the Dark One as fast as her feet could take her.

“Thank you for taking such good care of me, my dear husband,” said Rys, clinging gently to Flio. She was moved that Flio thought of her when Uliminas had attacked him with poison.

“Of course!” Flio smiled. “You’re precious to me, Rys.” He held her gently, his arms around her shoulders.

“My love...” said Rys, pressing closer.

That night when they went to bed, things were quite a bit more energetic than usual.

◇The Citadel of the Dark One◇

“And you, Uliminas, were unable to harm this man?”

Gholl, the Dark One, sat upon his throne as Uliminas made her report, his demonic aura welling up behind him. Gholl was an enormous and powerfully muscular demon, his skin a bluish black. Atop his head were two large horns—the mark of his station.

Uliminas knelt before him, sweating nervously. She had come, after all, to report her failure to eliminate a man who might be a threat to the Dark Army. It was far from unheard of for the Dark One to reduce underlings who fail in their missions to ash on the spot. There was the option of not telling the Dark One about this particular incident, but Uliminas reasoned that news of Flio’s existence would eventually reach the Dark One’s ears one way or another. Therefore, it would be best to report the full details of what had happened at Flio’s house without concealing anything.

The Dark One stared at Uliminas, deep in thought. To her, the time she spent on her knees, waiting for the Dark One to speak felt like nothing short of eternity. Finally, he spoke. “I agree that this man may prove a threat to my army,” he said, slowly and deliberately. “Uliminas. I give you command of the dragons. Bring this man to me. Alive, if possible. Dead, if not.”

“As you command!” said Uliminas. “I *will* capture him, I purromise you!”

I thought he was meownna kill me... she thought as she sped out of the throne room. *I thought I was dead for sure...* Relief radiated from the depths of her heart. She rushed down the hallway, simply savoring being alive.

◇Flio’s House—The Following Day◇

“Human Flio, I must thank you for your hospurrality the other day.” Uliminas was perched on the head of an enormous dragon. Ten more dragons followed behind, each at least ten meters long. This was

the proud legion of dragons, the main strike team of the Dark Army, the finest of dragon-kind. They had destroyed countless human armies. Even forces led by Heroes past had collapsed before them. From her lofty vantage point, Uliminas towered over Flio, who was standing in the entryway to his house.



Flio's eyes lit up when he saw Uliminas and her army of dragons. "Wow," he said. "So that's a dragon... I've never seen one before!"

"Are there no dragons in the world you came from, my beloved?" asked Rys.

"There *are*," said Flio, conversing without any evident fear of the dragons before him, much to Uliminas's chagrin, "but they're rare. They're the kind of thing you hear about in legends like... Oh, there was one about a prince who made a pact with a dragon and became a dragon rider."

That Flio! Uliminas clicked her tongue in frustration. *How is he so calm in front of an army of dragons?!* Inside the house, past Flio, Uliminas could see Balirossa's party peeking through a crack in the door.

"Dragons!" said Balirossa. "Dragons! Lots of them!"

"Th-This is bad," said Blossom. "My legs won't stop shaking..."

"Ha," said Byleri. "Ha ha haaaaaa?!"

Belano said nothing. She had collapsed and was unconscious yet again.

That's how I'd expect a human to react to seeing this many dragons. But Flio seems purrfectly calm! Nervous, Uliminas cleared her throat. "Flio, look. Surrender and swear allegiance to the Dark Meown and we'll let you live. Refuse, and these dragons will burn mew alive." Even Flio, she thought, would have to surrender, surrounded by this many dragons.

But Flio only grinned wide at Uliminas's words. "Yeah? So it's okay if I fight them? I can help myself to their scales when I win, right? Ah, I've been wanting to try my hand at making dragon scale armor..."

Uliminas was even more unnerved than before at Flio's high spirits. *This man... Don't tell me he's even stronger than dragons...* But there was no turning back now. She looked him straight in the eyes. "Then we have nothing more to say. Purrpare to die!" She lowered her arm, signaling for the dragons to attack.

◇Some Time Later◇

I-Impawssible...

Uliminas's face was screwed in a look of desperation as she fled with the surviving dragons back towards the Citadel of the Dark One, in too much of a hurry to attend to the burnt fur on her back. Both she and her dragon had been grievously injured by a direct hit from Flio's lightning and barely managed to make it out alive. All that was left of her army were two dragons, both heavily injured.

The battle was over in a second. As the dragons descended on him

from all sides, Flio raised his right hand aloft, calling down a lightning bolt of cataclysmic power: the holy spell Heavenly Hammer. Ordinarily, it took ten high-level mages several hours of chanting to cast this spell—the most destructive of all holy magic.

Flio had cast it as if it were nothing. “Let’s try this one!” he’d said.

With that single bolt, seven of the eleven dragons fell from the sky, instantly burned to death. The rest fled before the overwhelming magic power of Flio. “Mreow?! W-Wait!” Uliminas ordered. “Stop! Come back!” But the dragons were absolutely terrified. Not a single one of them obeyed her commands.

Blossom stepped out of the house, her eyes wide in awe at the sight of the dragons driven away by Flio’s power. “Incredible, sir!” she said. “Maybe I should take advantage of the confusion and get some kills in myself. If I threw this spear and got lucky, I could earn the title ‘Dragonslayer!’” She jokingly tossed the spear in her hand lightly forward.

Flio, however, glanced at Blossom and said, “Wanna give it a try, then?” He faced her spear, chanting as it flew through the air, imbuing it with enchantment spells. *Haste, Sanctify, Heavy Blow*, and more and more and more. The spear began to glow brilliantly as it flew with incredible speed, straight towards the neck of the fleeing dragon lagging furthest behind its fellows. Blossom watched in amazement as the spear she had thrown as a joke severed the dragon’s head.

“Seriously?” she gasped. “For real?” Behind her, the rest of Balirossa’s party crowded around, no less awed as they watched the dragon fall to the earth. “Oh!” Blossom shouted. “Did I get the title?!” She checked her status, and cried out in joy.

Dragonslayer was a title that was appended automatically to the status of those who slew a dragon or a related monster. Those who bore this title were not only especially sought for employment by nobility, but had the special right to claim noble stations for themselves as well. Flio, of course, had also received this title.

When she heard Blossom’s cries of joy, Balirossa rushed over to Flio. “Sir Flio!” she shouted. “M-Me too! Do me too! Please! Please, I beg you!” She tossed her sword in the direction of the fleeing dragons, but they were already out of sight. Flio tried out a few spells, but in the end he hadn’t been able to hit them.

“I’m sorry, Balirossa,” he said. “I don’t think I can do it if they’re too far away to see.”

“I-I see...” Balirossa collapsed, crying and laughing in turns. “I see...”

If only I had that title... If only I could restore my family name.

◇Several Days Later◇

Gholl, the Dark One, walked alone through the forest. Disguising his form with magic to appear as a human and wearing an adventurer's garb, he traveled south along the road from the Delaveza Forest to Klyrode Castle.

To think that anyone could wreck my legion of dragons so thoroughly with a single spell...

He had watched Flio's battle against the dragons through his scrying crystal, and had witnessed Flio's overwhelming power with his own eyes. To say he was confused and dismayed would be an understatement.

To think a common adventurer—an adventurer, not a Hero—could use magic like that...

After what he had seen, Gholl had deemed Flio to be a critical threat. He had set out towards Flio's territory on his own, hoping to further investigate this man who could lay waste to an army of dragons.

◇The Citadel of the Dark One—Several Hours Earlier◇

"L-Lord Gholl, surely you don't need to go yourself... You could send the Demeown Generals, or your favorite servant, Uliminas..." Lord Gholl was on his way out of the castle when the leaders of his army came in front of him, Uliminas at their head. With her were the three surviving Infernals: a doppeladler, a giant lamia, and a grizzled lich steed. Even the lower commanders of his army were there.

Gholl simply glanced at the crowd. "Fengaryl was the strongest of you, and this man defeated him easily. You're no match for him." Everyone went silent. They couldn't deny the truth of the Dark One's words. Gholl faced his commanders and raised his right hand. "Don't worry. All I'm after this time is information." With that, he took his leave.

He followed the road south, all the way out of the forest, where he saw a building that looked like it might be Flio's house. He stopped in his tracks. "Hrm?" In front of him, almost impossible to detect if not for the tremendous caution he was taking, was a barrier and a trap. *Hrm... His traps are skillful too.* One more step and he would have been caught in them. Gholl felt beads of nervous sweat on his brow. He had disguised his form and hidden his demonic nature with magic, but this trap would without a doubt see through his sorcery and judge him to be a demon and an enemy. He folded his arms. *What now...? I need to get past this barrier...*

"And who might you be?" As he stood in thought, a woman

walked up to him from the inside of the barrier. She bore a sword. "Are you, perhaps, an acquaintance of the master or the lady of the house?" She was smiling, but her hand never left her sword's hilt, ready to strike any time.

"Well..." he started, "actually, I'm an old acquaintance of the lady of the house, you see. I heard she was living around here, so I thought I'd come calling..."

At his words, the woman drew her sword and suddenly pressed the tip against the base of Gholl's throat. "Which would make *you* someone with the Dark Army, no? You should know that she cut ties with you to become my lord's wife. What business do you have with her? Answer poorly, and you will face me, Balirossa!" Her smile had vanished completely. She was glaring daggers at him.



Hmpf! She tricked me with that question! I can't believe I exposed myself like that! Gholl couldn't help but admire Balirossa's wit and judgment. She had disarmed him by approaching with a smile, yet brought her sword to threaten him without hesitation as soon as she deemed him suspicious. Gholl focused his eyes, examining her status. *Hrm... An ordinary human. It would be easy to just kill her... But she's interesting, this girl.*

Gholl's lips curled up in a smile as he held out his hands in a display of peaceful intent. "Yes," he said, "you are correct. I am a demon. But my only purpose here is to see if what I've heard is true. I'll leave straightaway."

Balirossa sheathed her sword, making sure of his lack of hostility. "Then I suppose there is no need for this," she said, although she did not stop watching Gholl's movements carefully. "Is there any message you would have me give my lady?"

Gholl nodded repeatedly, paying close attention to Balirossa. *Hrm, hrm... She's a very diligent guard...and she knew when to back down, as well...* "Indeed," he said. "Tell her... Tell her I said, 'Next time let's have tea together and talk about old times.'"

"Understood. My name is Balirossa. May I have yours?"

"Gho-" he said, but caught himself at the last moment, stumbling over his words. *I shouldn't give her my real name...* he thought. "Ghosal," he said. "Tell her that." With that, Gholl turned on his heels and walked away.

◇The Citadel of the Dark One—Several Hours Later◇

"Well, my Lord Dark Meown? What did mew think of that Flio? Learn anything mewseful?" Back in his castle, Gholl was sitting silently on his throne, his arms folded and eyes shut tight. He didn't respond to the hellcat Uliminas's question nor show any sign of moving. "Lord Gholl?" she tried again, but he still gave no response.

Purrhaps he's thinking of a plan, she thought. *I guess I shouldn't bother him...* She bowed once, and left Gholl to his thoughts.

That woman, Balirossa... For a human, she had elegant movements, a dignified bearing, the courage to sacrifice herself for her master...

For some time now, Gholl had been somehow unable to stop thinking about his standoff with Balirossa. It was like her image was burned into his brain.

◇Flio's House◇

"No... Truly?!" Balirossa couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her whole body felt like a waterfall of nervous sweat at Flio's words.

“There’s no doubt about it,” Flio said. “He was in disguise, but that was the Dark One.” Rys, who was standing beside him, nodded. Both of them had sensed Gholl’s presence and hurried outside, but when they saw that Balirossa had beaten them to it, they decided to simply watch from the shadows.

“However, ‘Ghozal?’” said Rys, chuckling in amusement. “If he’s going to give a fake name, he should put more thought into it.”

“Regardless, it sounds like he wants to have tea together. What do you say, Rys?”

“Hm...” she pondered. “He has power worthy of a Dark One, but I’m afraid he’s a bit of a stick-in-the-mud. His conversation skills might leave you terribly bored, my lord.”

The two of them laughed as they spoke, but Balirossa was shaking. “Th-That was...th-the Dark One... I-I pointed my sword at...th-the Dark One... This is bad... He’ll kill me... He’ll kill me for sure...” There was no sign of her gallantry from when she had confronted Gholl. She couldn’t stop sweating, and there were tears in her eyes. Her face was a mess, with mucus dripping out her nose and slobber from her mouth.

“Hey, don’t get the floor dirty!” said Blossom. “It’s a pain to clean.”

“Ew, ew!” said Byleri. “Balirossa! That’s, like, really gross?”

Belano said nothing. She was busy scrubbing the floor.

“Grawr?” said Sybe.

The four of them—three humans and one bear—gathered around Balirossa, but she still would not stop trembling.

◇Flio’s House—Days Later◇

“Hey, Ghozal!” said Flio. “Come on in!” It was the fourth time that week the Dark One Gholl had come to visit in the guise of Ghozal. Flio greeted him with a smile.

“Hrm. Thank you for having me.” Ghozal held open his palm in a casual greeting.

Flio had set the barrier to not affect Gholl so that he could come visit whenever he liked. Since that day, Gholl had been paying frequent visits to Flio’s household. His objective was, of course, Flio... No, actually, the truth was he had been hoping to see Balirossa. Still mysteriously unable to forget the dignity with which she bore herself when she had confronted him, Gholl had started coming over whenever he had a spare moment.

However, Balirossa, aware that Ghozal was in fact the Dark One Gholl, would flee whenever he came, making excuses like, “I-I-I need to go to the river to do laundry!” or “I-I-I need to go to the mountains for firewood!” Gholl could only ever see glimpses of her before she

left. However, this only heightened his estimation of the knight. *Hrm... She's quite the hard worker! I've never seen her so much as take a break!*

Throughout all this, and after many conversations, Gholl found that he had begun at some point to look forward to his chats with Flio. *That Flio... Even though he must have noticed I am the Dark One, he doesn't give me any special treatment.* Talking with Flio was never boring, and the tea was good as well. He had become very comfortable spending time at Flio's house, and very much enjoyed his visits.

◇The Citadel's Throne Room—Later Still◇

Gholl was preparing to head out to Flio's house when Uliminas approached him, wearing a concerned expression. "My Lord Dark Meown... Aren't mew putting yourself in danger, going to that man's territory so meowften?" But Gholl grinned slyly.

"But think—wouldn't winning him to our side be the best outcome? He is more prepared to listen than I had assumed."

"Purr-Purrhaps, but..."

"Anyway, I'm off. Look after the castle while I'm gone."

Gholl hurried off, leaving Uliminas alone in the throne room watching him go. *If Lord Gholl keeps spending all his time at that man's place, people are gonna start spreading nasty rumors about him. I can hear them now... "Is the Dark Meown submitting to that man?!" or, "When did the Dark Meown become a bootlicker for a mere human!"*

Uliminas gazed up at the ceiling and sighed.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

"What's that you say?" asked King Klyrode, scowling at the aide in front of him. "He's visiting that adventurer? And you think he's a demon."

The aide nodded once, emphatically, and took a second look at the report in his hands. "There's no doubt about it, Your Majesty. We had spies assigned to monitor that adventurer—Flio is his name—just in case. After all, he has refused many times to answer our summons. They report that a suspicious man has been seen making frequent visits to his house. They tailed the man and confirmed that he was headed in the direction of the Citadel of the Dark One."

"Ngh!" the king exclaimed in dismay. "That man... Could he be conspiring with the Dark One? We must send soldiers at—"

"Father, wait!" The princess, who had been standing in the back, raised her voice when she heard the king's words. She trotted in front of her father and spread her arms wide, facing him. "Father, I beg you to rethink this. We do not yet know for certain if this Mister Flio is

working with the Dark Army. If we handle this poorly, we will surely anger him and ruin what positive feelings he has for our kingdom. We may even drive him to join forces with the Dark One! Before sending soldiers, would it not behoove us to simply speak with him? We should not just send summons after summons, but listen to what he—”

“You be quiet!” the king interrupted, enraged by his daughter’s words. “Princess, do you think you can govern a kingdom by ideals alone? Don’t confuse your dreams for reality!”

“But!”

“Enough! Someone remove this insolent daughter of mine from my sight!” Under the king’s orders, the guards went to surround the princess. She lowered her head, and left the room on her own.

King Klyrode clicked his tongue as he watched her leave.

◇The Southern Stronghold◇

The Golden-Haired Hero raised his voice when he heard the news. “Is that true?! That Flio guy has been consorting with demons?!”

“That seems to be the case,” said the woman pouring his drink. “I happened to hear about it from the soldiers’ gossip in the castle.”

As before, the Hero was hiding away in the fortress to the south of Klyrode Castle. He had been plying the maids assigned to tend to his needs with treasure, calling on them to investigate the state of affairs in the castle proper. Through them, he had heard rumors about Flio. He had started scheming as soon as news of the adventurer’s existence came to his attention. “If I were to use such a strong man to do my bidding, it might not be so impossible to defeat the Dark One...” Seeking any way to bring Flio under his control, he had been sending regular messengers to the castle begging the king to summon Flio for him, and also making his maids search for any information related to the man. When he heard this latest bit of news, he grinned arrogantly.

Tsuya, who had been sitting beside him, looked up from her work portioning out dishes for the Hero with a worried expression on her face. “Ummm, my Lord Hero, what exactly are you planning?”

“Isn’t it obvious?! I’m gonna use this information to bring that man to heel!” he said before laughing loudly, “ha ha ha ha ha!”

◇Flio’s House—The Following Day◇

Taking his knights who had been stationed at the fortress, the Golden-Haired Hero set out for the house he had heard was Flio’s. When Balirossa and her party caught sight of them through the window, they were bewildered and perplexed. “Wh-Why are knights from the castle surrounding our house?” Balirossa asked.

“Hey wait,” said Blossom, pointing out a figure, “isn’t that our

shut-in Hero?"

"Wait, what?!" said Byleri. "The Hero doesn't, like, have a problem with us, does he?"

"Of all the luck..." said Belano.

Standing next to the four, Rys regarded the knights with a dubious expression. "Well, my lord? If they're unwanted, I could certainly send them running." Sybe beat his chest, like he was saying, "Leave it to me!"

"W-Well, I'm gonna go see what they want first," said Flio.

"Would you all mind waiting here?" He went outside the house alone, forcing himself to smile. As he stepped out the door, the Golden-Haired Hero rode up to him upon a white horse.

"You! Commoner!" he said. "Listen here! Your dealings with demons are known to us!" He drew his sword and pointed it at Flio. "By all rights, no one would have cause to complain if I cut you down where you stand. However... I will give you a chance to redeem yourself. Become my servant and assist me in my quest to slay the Dark One! If you do, I myself will petition the king to pardon your crimes. I'll even offer you any reward you please. Well? Not a bad exchange, is it? Answer me! Should you refuse, know that your life is forfeit!" Still on horseback, he spread his arms wide, looking smugly down at Flio.

This is it... he thought, riding high on his words. This has to be one of the top three moments of my life! Now Flio will become my servant, and I will lead him to slay the Dark One! Making me a true Hero, a legend in this kingdom!

"Sir Hero!" cried Balirossa, sticking her face out the window.

"This is coercion!"

"Show some regard for other people!" shouted Blossom, following suit.

"Yeah! Um, totally!" said Byleri. "Aha ha ha..."

Belano just scoffed and gave the Hero a defiant glare.

Beside them, Rys and Sybe looked like they could hurl themselves at the Hero at any moment for daring to threaten Flio. Flio, meanwhile, simply smiled. "I see," he said. "I have no desire to work for the castle, nor do I wish to fight you. Needless to say, I also do not wish to be cut down where I stand. Therefore, I believe you give me no choice but to leave this land." He turned back to look at his house where the rest of his company stood. "That's my preference, at least... Are you okay with this, Rys?"

"Yes," she said, nodding her head slowly. "I will go anywhere as long as it is with my husband." Sybe also nodded his fervent assent.

"S-Sir Flio!" said Balirossa. "Please, allow me to come with you!"

"Take me too!" said Blossom. "I'll handle any farmwork you need

doing!”

“What?” said Byleri. “Um, can I come too?”

“...And me!” said Belano.

“Hey, wait!” Flio interjected. “Don’t you need to go back to the castle?” Balirossa emphatically shook her head. “I cannot give my allegiance to a kingdom that allows its Hero to engage in coercion. From today on, I am no longer a knight of Klyrode!” Balirossa and the rest of her party nodded along with her.

Flio was hesitant. “Just like that? You don’t want to give it more thought?” he said. “Well...I suppose we can talk about this more later.” Grinning wryly, Flio raised his right hand in the air and began casting a spell. First, he himself began to glow, but soon the light spread to his house and his garden.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s head off.” He focused his consciousness on one part of the map he saw displayed in his mind. “Hmm... This spot looks good,” he said, and cast Transference. In an instant, the house, the garden, Flio, and his party were all gone, vanished into thin air.

The knights were in disarray. “What?!” said one, uncomprehending.

“They’re gone?!” said another. “Their house too?!”

“That’s impossible!” said a third. “Was that Transference? He really used it over such a wide area?!”

The Golden-Haired Hero, however, was still off in his own little world, and had yet to notice that Flio was gone. It took almost a full minute before he came to the realization that Flio had refused to become his servant and had disappeared along with his house. Utterly dismayed, he turned on the spot and once more secluded himself in the Southern Stronghold. Naturally, he did not neglect to send a demanding message to the king that said, “Find Flio and make him my servant!”

The Dark One Gboll burst with rage when he heard what had happened. “I am going to teach those louts a lesson they won’t forget!” he declared, and, arming himself, set out alone.

When Uliminas noticed what was happening, she rallied the army, leading them herself to follow after Gboll. “Th-The Dark Meown is going to battle! Don’t fall behind!” And so, an army tens-of-thousands strong passed through the Delaveza Forest, taking Klyrode completely by surprise. They tore through the Magical Kingdom’s defenses, and before long they were just to the north of Klyrode Castle itself, where they set up camp.

They continued to camp there, not advancing further, simply projecting an air of intimidation by their very presence and throwing

the townsfolk into disarray. At the very front, the Dark One Ghol stood, glaring down the castle.

I'll teach them a lesson for spoiling my fun!

◇One Month Later◇

It had been a month since Flio and his household had vanished. King Klyrode and the knights in the castle had been terrified when the Dark Army attacked without warning, setting camp right outside the castle. The castle was protected by powerful wards that even the Dark One could not easily breach, but with the army camped outside its walls, the situation had never been more precarious.

Finally, the King left the castle through a secret passage, and went himself to the Southern Stronghold. Hoping that he could coax the Golden-Haired Hero to lead the army to drive off the Dark One, he supplicated himself personally before the fortress gates. However, the Hero refused to allow the gates to open, even for the King. No matter how loudly he shouted, there was no response.

He returned to the castle in despair. "We have no other choice," he said, gathering every mage and witch in the castle. "Our only hope is to use *that* spell." And so it was decided that they would invoke the secret arts of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, and use the spell that was the utmost pinnacle of divine magic: Purification.

The skies began to glow, and a brilliant light enveloped the earth. Even the Dark Army could only retreat before the combined magical power of all of Klyrode. They had succeeded in driving the demons away, but the victory came at a great price.

Every mage and witch had their magic completely depleted. It would take months for them to fully recover, even years for some. They fell unconscious, and were taken to the infirmary to sleep. The King too fell into a deep sleep, having used his own magic power to cast the spell. In accordance with the legal code of Klyrode, the Princess was appointed to rule the country as regent until her father awakened.

You may recall that Purification is the same spell Flio cast in the Delaveza Forest. The spell that took all the magic power of all the magic users in the castle to invoke had cost Flio one-third of his total magic. Although, in his case, it only took two minutes to recover.

◇The Dark Army◇

Although they had been forced to retreat by the Magical Kingdom's Purification, Ghol had sensed what they were doing before they could finish casting the spell, and directed his army to fall back. Because of his quick action, they were able to keep their casualties to

a minimum. The undead and ghost-type demons who made up the bulk of the Dark One's fighting force were unable to approach the land that had been affected by Purification, so they resolved to withdraw until the effects of the spell had faded.

◇The Golden-Haired Hero◇

The Hero had been in his fortress when the Dark Army had closed in, and for the past month had stayed shut indoors, not even sending out messengers. It was only when he heard word that the demons had been driven off that he began to once more send forth messages. He didn't waste a single moment before resuming his habits. He demanded again that they search for Flio, he demanded alcohol and food, and he demanded gold and silver. The Princess had, however, had quite enough, and resolved to cut him off. She delivered one final notice to the Hero:

"If you set out immediately to face the Dark One, we of Klyrode will provide a minimum amount of support. If you refuse, however, you are to leave the fortress at once and never again don the title of 'Hero.'" The Golden-Haired Hero shook violently when he received this message.

Next, the Princess convened a council with all the essential staff of the castle to discuss new strategies for opposing the Dark One. The minister was the first to offer his opinion: "Why don't we summon another candidate to be the Hero?" Most of the members in attendance seemed to take his view.

The Princess, however, could not assent to this. "We have summoned so many, and sent anyone with any potential against the Dark One with no success. I cannot approve of continuing this practice." She was obstinate on this point, and the meeting fell into disorder. When it was clear that they were making no progress towards their goal, the Princess at last called for the Oracle.

The Oracle was a woman who could see into the future to a certain degree. This was not magic, but a rare skill she possessed: Prophecy. Her predictions were often vague, however, and once she had made one it took a fairly long time before she could make another. "Tell me," said the princess. "Can you see any way to save our kingdom?"

The Oracle peered into her crystal and activated her skill. Before long, she looked up, turning to face the Princess. "Seek the True Hero," she said. "The True Hero has already been summoned." She bowed deeply. When they heard these words, everyone thought of the same person: Flio. The True Hero the Oracle spoke of must be the man the Golden-Haired Hero had foolishly driven off.

Once more the order went out to find Flio, but the Princess had no interest in making him the Golden-Haired Hero's subordinate. Her objective was to invite Flio back to the kingdom as the True Hero.

"That Princess..." scoffed the Golden-Haired Hero when he heard what had happened from Tsuya. "Why, she just does whatever she likes!" He bit his lip in irritation. Since the Princess had sent him her final notice, all of the women in the fortress had left. After all, they had only obeyed the Hero because of the promise of gold and silver, and because they could indulge in all the delicious food and drink they wanted in his company. When they heard that no more would be coming, they all left.

All of them except for Tsuya.

At first, Tsuya had been ordered to accompany the Hero, but she elected to stay behind by her own free will. Tsuya was born in the slums. She had been working in a sleazy bar when she chanced to catch the eye of someone from the castle, and ended up employed there to entertain guests. Her job was to stay with guests, pour liquor for them, and even keep them company until morning if it was asked of her. None of the other residents in the castle had any occasion to speak with her.

The Golden-Haired Hero, however, had always treated her kindly. He would make her pour him liquor, and sometimes he would take her to bed, but unlike the others he always spoke to her like they were friends. And so, Tsuya found that she had no desire to leave the Hero's side.

"My Lord Hero," she said. "What are you gonna do now?" She was anxious for the future.

"Hm, well..." he said. "What was it you were telling me about the other day? Let me hear more about it." A sly grin slowly spread over his face.

Chapter 4: The Djinn and the Grand Magus of Midnight

The shopkeeper gasped. “Master Flio,” he said. “This shield... Is it, by any chance, made from dragon scale? Where in the world did you get this?”

Flio smiled. “You have a good eye, sir,” he said. “Although I’m afraid I’ll have to keep my channels for goods like this a secret.”

The shopkeeper glanced between the shield and Flio’s smiling face before leaning in close to Flio’s ear to whisper, so the adventurers patronizing his shop wouldn’t hear. “I’ll buy this at your asking price,” he said. “But I need you to promise me that if you get your hands on any more dragon scale gear you’ll bring it to me. Please.” He quietly handed Flio a bag stuffed full of gold coins.

“Of course,” said Flio, calmly taking the bag. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

In the western part of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode lay the city of Houghtow, the Capital of Trade. Many demihumans made their homes here in this busy city trafficked by countless merchants and adventurers. It was every bit unlike the town surrounding Klyrode Castle.

Flio left the equipment shop and purchased some food and sundries before leaving the city. A little ways out of town, he walked into his house.

“My husband!” cried Rys, dashing forward and wrapping her arms tightly around him. “Welcome home!” She pressed her lips to his.

“Glad to be home,” he said after they pulled away from their lingering kiss. He gave her a gentle smile as he embraced her once again.

On the day Flio had cast Teleportation and vanished before the Golden-Haired Hero’s eyes, he had come here to Houghtow, where he had been living ever since. Between Flio’s restitution from the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode for their botched summoning and the reward money for the party’s relentless monster hunts, they had enough funds to live comfortably for the rest of their lives. There was no need to work, but Flio was, after all, a former merchant. He was happiest when he was busy with something, and had been thinking of taking

up some kind of profession.

At first he considered life as an adventurer, but after his past experiences he decided to give that up. The reason the Golden-Haired Hero had found him and forced him to leave, after all, came down to the fact that the Adventurers' Association sent reports to the castle. Ultimately, Flio decided to put his skills to use and create equipment and magic gems to sell to shops in the town.

"That dragon scale shield I made fetched a pretty good price," Flio said happily as Rys started putting the groceries away.

"You really can do anything, can't you, my love? Even I was taken aback when I saw the quality of that shield," said Rys, beaming at her husband. "Now come and relax a little. I'll make us a pot of tea." Flio thanked her graciously and watched as she went back into the kitchen.

Flio had finally succeeded in disabling the setting on his Bottomless Bag that prevented him from placing the remains of living creatures inside, and had begun using it to store parts of the monsters he had previously slain. With hides, scales, claws, and bones as materials, he would use his free command over magic to shape them into equipment or other items to sell in town. Flio was concerned that if he told people the truth about the provenance of his goods, people might begin to bother him with commissions or pester him about where he got his materials, so he made up his mind to tell everyone that they came into his hands through "secret channels."

Rys settled into her role as wife, and spent her time doing housework every day. She had become quite adept at cooking and cleaning as well. Whenever she had a spare moment, she could be seen browsing through the knitting book she bought in town and practicing various patterns. It seemed that all of her test pieces were baby clothes.

Balirossa would often go to the forest nearby, either to receive sword training from Flio or to hunt. Monsters in this region were not as powerful as they were north of Klyrode Castle, and Balirossa was now strong enough to handle them on her own. When she wasn't in the forest, she would spend most of her time hard at work helping Rys keep the house spotless.

Blossom devoted herself wholly to maintaining the garden that had been brought along with them. Incidentally, all of her gardening tools were made by Flio out of dragon scale. She was probably the only gardener with such a set in the whole wide world.

Byleri, meanwhile, created a pasture alongside Blossom's garden, and began to raise horse-type monsters. Byleri had always loved horses, and was good enough at their care to be entrusted with the

kingdom's warhorses for a time. She raised a herd of relatively gentle-natured monsters Flio and Balirossa had captured, and would sometimes lend them to traveling merchants to hitch their carriages to. She earned a pretty decent amount this way.

Belano enrolled in the Houghtow College of Magic as a member of the public. Rather than trying to learn from Flio or Rys, whose magic was far above her level, she found it much more effective to take remedial courses on the basics of offensive magic.

Flio was worried that something as large as a pet psychobear would stand out too much, and used his magic to transform Sybe into a horned rabbit. Sybe spent its days running around the house on two legs, making cute snuffling noises. Sybe would often accompany Balirossa on her hunts, although it must be said that the rabbit brought down many, many more monsters than she did.

And so, Flio and his household settled easily into their peaceful new lives in Houghtow.



One day, Flio and Rys had decided to go into town. They liked to visit the city once every few days to shop for groceries and eat out together.

“Rys,” said Flio, “what would you like for lunch today?”

“Let’s see... Personally, I’m interested in that restaurant on the corner. I remember smelling something delicious from there the other day.”

“Sounds good to me. Shall we?”

Rys nodded happily. She was holding onto Flio’s arm, trying to be moderate in her affections. They were in public, after all.

Today, Balirossa was with them. She had an errand to do in town. As she walked beside them she gazed at the pair with a slightly envious smile. “My lord, my lady, it’s always splendid to see you so happy together.” *If only I had someone like that*, she thought, turning her eyes upwards. *Ideally, they would be nobility, so that they could help me restore my family name...* As her thoughts trailed off, she suddenly thought she caught a glimpse of Gholl’s face floating in the sky. *Wha?! O-Of all people...why would I see the Dark One’s face in the clouds?!* She shook her head violently.

“What’s wrong, Balirossa? We’re going to leave you behind at this rate,” called Rys.

“Ah! I’m sorry, my lady! I’m coming!” Balirossa hurried after the husband and wife.

◇Meanwhile, in the Dungeons of Klyrode Castle◇

“Hmmm... So this is the castle’s sanctuary...” The Golden-Haired Hero looked up at the enormous entryway he had found deep under Klyrode Castle. “The place where they hide their secret treasure...” All around him guards were lying defeated. The Hero couldn’t measure up to the Dark One or a high-tier monster, but he was still quite strong for a human. He had no trouble with opponents on the level of these guards.

The Golden-Haired Hero laughed loudly as he opened the door with the key he pilfered. “Now, let’s hurry up and use this treasure to defeat the Dark One! And once I’ve been properly acknowledged as the Hero, I can go back to living the high life.” He stepped inside, heading deep into the recesses of the sanctuary.

“My Lord Herooooo!” said Tsuya, trotting alongside him. She pointed him towards a solitary sword sticking out of a stone pedestal. “I think that’s the sword!”

“So if I can get this thing out, some sealed djinn will grant my wishes? No matter what I ask for?”

“Yessir,” she answered. “That’s what I heard!”

The Golden-Haired Hero stared at the sword. “Okay, then how do I get it out?”

“Perhaps you should try pulling?”

“Hm. All right, let’s give it a try.” At Tsuya’s suggestion, he placed his hands on the hilt and pulled. The sword slid out with no resistance, and a strange smoke began to rise from the hole.

Tsuya had a bad feeling about the smoke. She stumbled in front of the Hero, trying to shield him. “M-My Lord Herooooo! Get back!” Before their eyes, the smoke slowly gathered into a solid mass, taking the form of a woman. She was practically naked, only her chest and hips covered, and even those only by the thinnest of a cloth wrapping. But even more than the figure’s eroticism, the Hero and Tsuya were struck by a strange chilly sensation that shook them to the bottom of their hearts.

The woman opened her narrow eyes, regarding the two humans with an unreadable expression. She spoke without moving her mouth; her words projected directly into their minds. *I am Hiya*, she said. *The djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness... Was it you who released me from the Sealing Sword?*

“Yes!” said the Hero with as much force as he could muster. “Yes, that’s us!”

Hiya slowly nodded her head. *Then, in my name, I shall grant you three wishes... Tell me what you desire.*

“And I can ask for anything?”

Anything at all. I am the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness.

“In that case, my first wish is for you to strike Flio from the face of the earth! He is a wicked man who shamed me by refusing to do as he was told. Djinn! I command you!”

Hiya’s smile was as cold as ice. *As you wish*, she said. *And in exchange, the lives of every human in this castle are mine.* She vanished, and jet-black collar-like rings appeared around their necks.

“Wait, come back! Wh-What’s with this collar?!” The Golden-Haired Hero tried as hard as he could to get the ring off of his neck, but it simply wouldn’t budge.

Hiya: the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. When she chose to acknowledge someone, she would deign to grant them three wishes. However, her wishes came at a cost. A long time ago, a king wished for her to vanquish the Dark One of his day, and in exchange she claimed the lives of half of the living beings on the continent. They were snuffed out in an instant. Her power was vast, but so was her price. Fearful of her power, the king ordered his mages and witches to create the Sealing Sword in order to lock Hiya away in a sacred pedestal. She was hidden in the depths of the castle sanctuary, never to be summoned unless the absolute worst were to befall the kingdom.

The rumor Tsuya had heard said nothing of this. All she knew was that a djinn who could grant three wishes was sealed away in the underground sanctuary, and thus she had told the Hero the same. His wishes were going to be: first, to destroy Flio, who had humiliated him; second, to destroy the Dark One and his minions; and third, to be made the king of his own country.

The collars were known as the Collars of Sacrifice. When Hiya successfully granted a wish, they would sever the neck of their wearer. At that moment, a ring had appeared around the neck of everyone in the castle, from the Princess to the commoners.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

“No... This is the Collar of Sacrifice!” The Princess sprung to her feet, looking at the collar around her neck with despair in her eyes. “Has someone released the djinn? What careless wish could they have made...?” She turned to her guards. “Send the guards and knights to the underground sanctuary. Capture the person who did this at once!” At her words, the guards saluted and rushed down the hallway.

The princess anxiously touched her fingers to the collar around her neck. *We need to be quick...but there’s more than just the djinn hidden down there...*

◇Houghtow City◇

Flio, Rys, and Balirossa were in high spirits as they finished eating and went outside. "I believe I chose an excellent restaurant, did I not?" said Rys, cheerfully.

"You did," said Flio. "We'll have to go there again."

Balirossa smiled. "Your judgment is enviable as always, my lady. That was truly delicious."

While the three were chatting, a woman walked up to them—Hiya. She spoke directly into their minds. *My name is Hiya*, she began. *You are the one called Flio?*

"I am," said Flio, his cheerful smile cooling slightly.

Then perish. Hiya swung her right arm downwards with unbelievable speed. Rys, however, jumped in front of her husband, not hesitating for a second. "My lord, watch out!" she cried as she crossed both her arms in a guard to block Hiya's strike.

Hiya's arm sliced effortlessly through Rys's guard, slicing a diagonal wound throughout her entire body. Her fresh blood sprayed into the air. She crumbled to the ground. "Run..." she said.

"Run...my...husband..."

And then she said no more.

"Lady Rys!" Balirossa screamed as she ran forward. "You *fiend!* How *dare* you!" But then, a strange voice rang out, echoing through the whole street.

REWINDING TIME...

"H-Huh?" Rys was sure her body had been cut in half. But here she was, perfectly intact, and there was Hiya, still where she had been standing before she attacked.

You reversed time... Perhaps you are underestimating me. Hiya did not seem particularly surprised at the situation, only eyeing Flio with her icy smile. Flio strode towards her with his eyes narrowed, his mouth slightly open.



As a reward for your defiance, I will tell you something. I am Hiya. The djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. I have achieved the utmost pinnacle of the magic of light as well as the magic of darkness. Your spells will not— As she was speaking, Flio's fist struck her on the jaw. With absolutely no wind-up, he unleashed a devastating uppercut, launching her into the sky.

She flew absurdly high before plummeting back towards the earth. *Y-You... Who do you think I am...?* she sputtered as she pulled herself to her feet, holding her hand to her injured jaw. *I am the djinn who commands the origin—* This time, Flio kicked her square in the face, sending her flying backwards. He leapt after her, flying through the air with incredible speed, and struck her in midair with both feet, hitting her into the ground with enough force to leave an enormous crater.

I am...the djinn who... Flio seized the fallen djinn by the hair and pulled her to her feet, where he struck her with a headbutt. *I am...the djinn...*

"Enough of that nonsense!" Flio glared at Hiya. Her hair was in tatters, and her forehead had been violently split open by his headbutt. Viridescent blood ran down her face.

Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, had, as she said, ultimate control over light and darkness magic. There was no spell in the world that could pierce her defenses. Of course, she also employed a number of defensive magic spells against physical attacks. They were active now, but with Flio's skills, which were so far above the limit they could only be displayed with that strange symbol, he was able to strike through her shields entirely, dealing damage directly to her body.

"You hurt my wife!" he said, kneeling her in the solar plexus. "I'm not gonna be satisfied until I make you suffer!" He spoke with uncharacteristic harshness as he lay into her as if she were a rag doll, glaring with a look of absolute rage.

As Hiya's vision dimmed, for the first time in her life she understood the meaning of "fear." In fact, she was *terrified*. She could feel her whole body going numb.

"I'm still...still not satisfied," said Flio as he swung his arm.

Hiya spoke, for once not using telepathy but speaking with her voice. "I-I'm sorry!" she pleaded. "Please... Please forgive me..."

Flio's fist sunk into her face.

◇Flio's House—Several Hours Later◇

"Wh-What happened to her?" Blossom stared dumbstruck at the woman in Flio's arms. She was horribly beaten up, in an entirely

miserable state.

“I went a bit overboard in a fight, so I thought I should probably heal her up,” said Flio, tossing Hiya onto the living room floor and plopping down heavily in one of the chairs. Rys kept clinging tightly to him without letting go, her face flushed and her breathing ragged. It was plain as day that she was worked up.

Rys had been deeply moved. Seeing her cool-headed husband explode with rage against someone who would harm her—his wife—was too much for her. It was like she could no longer keep her love from bursting out of her chest. “Oh, my love... I’m so happy you would do that for me... I’m such a lucky girl...” Still cuddled close to him, no longer able to bear the intensity of her emotions, she began to strip.

“Hey, wait! Not here! There are people here!” said Flio, taking her in his arms. Without missing a beat she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him greedily on the lips. The two kissed passionately as Flio carried her up the stairs to their bedroom.

They left Hiya forgotten and beaten ragged on the living room floor, while Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano stood around awkwardly, red from having witnessed the couple’s passionate lovemaking. Sybe the horned rabbit hopped into the room and regarded poor Hiya with a curious expression.

It was quite some time before anyone thought to check on her.

◇Klyrode Castle◇

Suddenly, the collar around the Princess’s neck vanished, leaving her bewildered. “What could this mean?” she wondered aloud. The Collar of Sacrifice appeared around the necks of those Hiya chose as her price to be sacrificed when she granted a wish. The Princess’s was now gone, her life surprisingly still intact.

She was baffled. She racked her mind for an explanation, but found none. “Do any of you know what this means?” she asked, raising her voice so that everyone in the throne room could hear. But the mages, witches, and knights around her were equally confused as their collars disappeared as well. Nobody was able to answer her question.

The Princess gasped as a thought struck her. “No...” she said, shaking her head as if to banish the idea from her mind. “Could the djinn have possibly failed to grant a wish? But there’s no way... She’s said to have even vanquished the Dark One of old...”

Unbeknownst to the Princess, her wild conjecture was entirely correct.

◇Flio’s House—Later Still◇

Rys emerged from the bedroom in exceptionally high spirits. “Time for dinner, everyone! ♪” she sang, grinning wildly as she skipped her way to the kitchen. Flio followed her down the stairs and stepped into the living room where Hiya lay unconscious and injured. He approached her and healed her with the highest-level recovery magic in existence.

“Where...” she started, looking all around the room as she regained consciousness. And then she noticed Flio. “Eeek!” The instant she saw his face, she shrieked and hid herself behind Balirossa. Her whole body was shaking.

Flio lowered his head in apology. “I went a bit too far,” he said. “Sorry. I did heal you though, so call it even?” Raising his head, he extended his arm to her in a gesture of goodwill, hoping to salvage this relationship that had started off on the wrong foot.

Hiya fell to the ground, kneeling and prostrating herself. “O-Of course!” she said as she bowed her head to the floor again and again. “Of course we’re even! Please forgive me for attacking you!”

◇Days Later◇

Flio double-checked to make sure he had properly put the merchandise in his Bottomless Bag. “All right,” he said, “I’m off to town.” Rys followed, affectionate as ever and a bright smile on her face.

As they made to leave, Hiya appeared before their eyes and walked up to them. “Exalted One,” she started. “Please allow your humble servant Hiya to clean the house and do the laundry, and to stand guard in your absence.” She bowed with an air of utmost reverence.

“Hiya,” said Flio, “if we’re going to be living together, could you stop calling me ‘Exalted One?’ It’s embarrassing.”

Hiya shook her head. “What are you saying? Exalted One, you forgave me for what I did to your wife, and took me in when I had nowhere to go. What should I call you if not that?”

Ahh... This is one of those situations where they won’t listen to anything you say. Flio’s lips curled up into a tired, wry smile as Hiya spoke, her voice full of passion. He gave up on convincing her. “Okay, sure,” he said. “Then I’ll leave the house in your hands.”

“As you wish. Travel safely, Exalted One. And your wife, as well.”

Flio and Rys left the house, leaving behind Hiya, who was still bent over in a deep bow. “Is this really going to work out, my love?” said Rys once they were out of earshot. She sounded uneasy. “I don’t know how I feel about sharing a roof with that person...”

“Yeah...” said Flio, coolly. “There’s part of me that only thinks of

her as the person who harmed you. But she swore not to claim any more human lives, and, more to the point, I just feel sorry for her. She really doesn't have anywhere to go."

Rys managed a smile and grabbed hold of Flio's arm. "You really are too kind, my love," she said. "My kind husband... I love you."

"I love you too, Rys," said Flio. "Thank you." The two headed for the city, Rys clinging as tight as ever to Flio's arm.

◇Klyrode Castle—Sanctuary◇

It had already been several days since the Golden-Haired Hero and Tsuya barricaded themselves in the sanctuary of Klyrode Castle. The Hero was on his last legs, staring at the sanctuary door in front of him with a haggard expression. "How did this happen...?" he said. "How did it come to this...?"

"Hero!" came a voice from outside. "We know you're in there!"

"You can't hide in there forever! Surrender and come with us!"

The hallway was full to bursting with guards and knights. Inside, the sound of the door being struck and voices urging the Hero to come out echoed throughout the sanctuary. Fortunately for him, the sanctuary locked from the inside—it was meant to be a place of refuge in an emergency, after all. With the door locked, there was nothing the castle's knights could do except stand around and wait.

The hero stood in a daze, staring at the door and listening to the tumult outside. *Why...? That djinn was meant to eliminate everything in my way and give me my own country where I could reign forever as Hero! How did this go so wrong...?* It had been days since the djinn departed to kill Flio, but she had yet to return. Even the Collar of Sacrifice that appeared when they had made their pact had vanished. *That Flio... Did he manage to defeat her? Is that even possible?* His thoughts were racing, but it was no use. He couldn't think of anything.

I was chosen to be the Hero, wasn't I? How come no matter how much I level up my stats won't change? I can crush humans, but I don't have a chance against a high-level monster! There's no way I could defeat the Dark One... He covered his face with both hands.

"M-My Lord Hero..." Tsuya drew close to him, a worried look in her eyes.

And those people from the castle... he continued. *Why didn't they tell me about the djinn? It's because they didn't explain things properly that I ended up in this situation. It's all their fault... They're to blame... I didn't do anything wrong... I'm not in the wrong here!* He turned his head up, looking to the heavens. "This is your fault," he said in a low voice that felt like it was coming forth from Hell itself. "It's your fault for not making me strong enough!"

Just then, a dark voice entered his mind. *Do you desire power?*

“Who is that?” he asked. “Who are you?”

Does it matter who I am? If power is what you seek, I can give it to you.

“You’ll... You’ll make me stronger?”

I will. I will make you the strongest thing alive.

“And...what will it cost?”

Oh, it won’t cost you a thing. All I ask is that you raze this castle and stamp out the royal line. You can do what you like after that.

“All right,” said the Hero. “I’ll do what you ask. Just give me power!”

Ha ha ha... the voice laughed. Then our contract is sealed.

“And now, I will finally, finally have the strength I need!” The Hero began laughing maniacally. “Mwa ha... MWA HA HA HA HA!”

“L-Lord Hero?” All Tsuya had heard was the Hero muttering to himself until he suddenly burst into laughter. But now, there was a voice entering *her* mind as well.

A fine offering. I believe I will take this body for myself.

“What?!” Tsuya panicked, but only for a second before her mind went black. Her thoughts vanished. She went limp, her head drooping, but in a second she raised it up again.

“Hmm... How many centuries has it been since I lived in a body...?” The dark consciousness that had possessed Tsuya’s body twisted her lips into a sneer and faced the Golden-Haired Hero. “That being said, these clothes aren’t exactly my style.” She examined the outfit Tsuya had been wearing—a dress that exposed rather a lot of her body. Screwing up her face, she snapped her fingers. Tsuya’s dress turned to smoke and transformed itself into a black bodysuit with an attached miniskirt, and a black cape. “Yeah,” she nodded. “This’ll do.”

“Now,” she said, turning her attention back to the Hero. “O Golden-Haired Hero, by the power of my black arts, let’s give you a more fitting form, shall we?”

The hero screamed, but his voice already sounded more like a monster roaring as his body began to change. He grew and grew to enormous size, golden fur covering his face. From his right and left hands he sprouted giant claws. He had the head of an evil-looking ram, the body of a bear, and the tail of a serpent. There were great curved talons on his hands and feet. He was, in all senses, a monster.

The thing in Tsuya’s body cackled evilly as she glanced at the Hero-beast behind her. “Then let’s be off, my darling Monster Hero! We must punish the fools of this castle for locking me away. They will taste the wrath of the Grand Magus of Midnight, Damalynas the Apricot!”

The Princess was struck silent when she heard the news. “And now...Damalynas is back?”

Damalynas the Apricot. The Grand Magus of Midnight. Long ago she had reigned as the strongest magic user in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. But in her quest for power she fell to the temptations of a demon and turned to the black magic of the Forbidden Book of the Underworld. In doing so, she was lost to the darkness.

She went wild, drunk on demonic power. But, at the cost of many lives, the mages of Klyrode Castle were able to rob her of her body and seal her consciousness inside a gem. The gem was hidden in the deepest part of the castle sanctuary.

“But how could that be? How could she have broken the seal?” The Princess touched her hand to her lips, deep in thought. “Perhaps its power was weakened from the energy backlash when the djinn was released...”

“Your Highness!” said an aide. “We need to evacuate immediately! Damalynas is coming this way—she means to destroy the castle!”

The Princess was unwilling. “I won’t run away! Assemble our armies at once and—”

“We can’t! Most of our knights are stationed at our fortresses in case the Dark Army attacks! There are almost none left in the castle itself! And most of our mages are still bedridden with magic exhaustion from casting Purification! At present, we have nothing in the castle with which to resist Damalynas...” The color drained from the Princess’s face at those words.

“Your Highness,” said a guard, “let us retreat for the time being. We can attempt to gather our forces from the field after and see if we have any means to strike her down.”

She thought it over for a second and nodded. “A-All right...” she said and rose to her feet. She departed from the throne room, protected by an impromptu escort.

◇Some Time Later◇

“Where are we?” the princess muttered, glancing around uneasily. She had escaped the castle along with a number of knights and mages. Fortunately, there were some who had recovered enough magic power to cast Teleportation.

“We are outside the city of Houghtow, west of Klyrode Castle,” said a mage. “Hopefully evacuating here will buy us some time.” The Princess looked at her surroundings again as she listened. “I’m very sorry, Your Highness... If we had more magic power, we could have taken you further from the castle...” The mages bowed. They all looked rather pale and sickly. Casting Teleportation had been a dicey

prospect in itself.

“There’s no need for apologies,” the Princess said. “That you were able to take us this far is enough. Guards, prioritize the defense of the mages.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” The knights moved as one to cover the magic users.

The Princess continued. “We should enter the city proper. We are far too visible in the open.” Her entourage wasted no time. The group took off at a run for the checkpoint at the city gates. But it was too late.

Found youuu! The Princess could feel the dark consciousness in her mind as the words entered her brain directly. *Not one of you is going to escape me.* A black gash opened in the sky, the Golden-Haired Hero in all his monstrous glory visible inside. Damalynas, in Tsuya’s body, was riding on his back, arms folded contemptuously as she looked down on the Princess and her guards. She laughed cruelly. “Mwa ha ha! Now... Surrender your lives to me! All of you!” The guards and Princess could only watch in fear as the Hero began to tear his way out of the rift in the sky, abject despair on their faces.

Suddenly, the black gash closed with a snap. “Who dares?” said Damalynas. And then she was gone. At the same time, the Princess heard a voice coming from behind her. She turned to look and saw a man, accompanied by a woman affectionately clinging to him.

“So Rys, got any preferences for where we eat today once I’m done with business?” said the man.

“Not especially,” said the woman. “I would be happy to eat anywhere you choose, my love.” The pair—Flio and Rys—continued happily chatting as they headed towards the city gates. On their way, they passed the Princess’s entourage, who were still standing dumbfounded.

“Oh, good afternoon,” he said, greeting them casually as he continued on into the city.

◇Inside Klyrode Castle◇

“How... What even happened?” Damalynas sat where she had landed, undignified and on her butt. She was utterly baffled. Beside her, the Hero in his beast form was also sprawled out, having landed awkwardly on the floor.

Damalynas had made her way up through the castle from the underground sanctuary, destroying everything in her path until she reached the throne room. She found it empty. The King must have fled. “It was the royal family who ordered me to be sealed away,” she said. “I won’t forgive them! Nor their descendants! Nor their successors!”

She scanned the area with sensor magic, and found the traces of their escape route. It was easy to pinpoint the destination of their Teleportation spell, and she appeared outside Houghtow with a Teleportation spell of her own. However, when she arrived she found her magic blocked by a powerful force. The gate closed shut, depositing her and the Hero back where they came from.

So there are still magic users in this world capable of such an absurd feat? she thought. *Fascinating...* Damalynas stood up, grinning and undaunted. "It takes a lot of guts to make a fool of Damalynas," she said, making her way to the monstrous Hero. "I'll make them pay for that with their life!"

◇Houghtow City◇

The Princess and her entourage dashed through the streets of Houghtow. "We have to find those two from earlier!" she commanded. Her knights saluted, scanning the area for any sign of them. As soon as the Princess realized that it must have been Flio and Rys who stopped Damalynas from appearing, she had stopped standing around dazed at the spectacle of the Grand Magus being repelled like it was nothing and began to pursue the pair into the city. She was exhausted. Her whole body was covered in sweat, and she was gasping for breath as she ran. *We need to hurry... We need to find them before Damalynas comes after us again! I don't know who those people are, but I'm sure it was they who...*

"Y-Your Highness! Look!" One of her knights raised his voice. He was pointing into the sky. The Princess, her companions, and even the passersby who happened to be in the area followed his gaze. There in the sky they could see the monstrous form of the transformed Hero. It seemed he had sprouted giant wings from his back. He was coursing straight towards them like a bird, moving at a ridiculous speed. In no time at all he had reached Houghtow, and landed right in front of the Princess.

Damalynas jumped down from the Hero's back and approached. "Can't stop me with magic when I just take to the skies, can you? You got off easy last time, but don't think you can escape me." The Princess froze, robbed of her hope. Seeing the despair in her eyes, Damalynas cracked a joyful grin. "Oh, that's a nice face you're making. Bit of a shame to send you to your grave looking like that, though." She extended her right arm in the Princess's direction. A magic circle appeared before the palm of her hand. "Is this the end of our little game? In your next life, take care to—"

"Stay away from Her Highness!" The knights escorting her charged the Grand Magus, blades drawn.

"Excuse me!" shouted Damalynas. "Can't you see we're getting to

the good part?" She turned her hand away from the Princess to point at them. A shockwave rippled outward from her hand, sending the knights flying back with a calamitous "Waaaaaaah!"

"And now it's your turn." Damalynas licked her lips as she turned back to face the Princess.



While Damalynas was preparing to deliver the coup de grâce, a noisy scene was playing out on the street corner where the knights she had blown away had landed. "Mistress," said Hiya, checking on Rys. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. But...Hiya, what are you doing here? Weren't you at home?"

"There was a surge of evil energy in this city. I hurried over the moment I sensed it in case I was needed."

Hiya had easily stopped the knights' flight in midair. Now she was standing between them and Rys. Rys had been standing outside the shop where Flio was conducting his business talks, waiting for him to finish, when without warning a group of knights came flying at her with incredible force. The knights were wearing heavy armor, and they were moving through the air at a very high speed. All in all, each of them had about the same force as a cannonball. If they had hit a building, it would have almost certainly crushed everyone inside. Even Rys would have probably been injured if they had happened to hit her.

And so, Hiya had stopped them, materializing at the last second and casually flicking her wrist, halting them in midair. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Rys was unhurt as the knights clattered to the ground. They lay there, thoroughly unconscious.

Hiya glanced at Damalynas. Her eyes were too narrow to be sure if they were open or shut, but now they seemed to flicker with a strange light. "Mistress," she said. "Do I have your permission to remove this loathsome woman who placed you in harm's way?"

"I suppose so," answered Rys. "She's still attacking people, after all. Can you take care of her before my husband finishes his business?"

"Your wish is my command." Hiya bowed deeply to Rys and turned, stepping towards Damalynas.

Once again Damalynas found herself interrupted as she prepared to attack the Princess. "And who might *you* be? Another busybody who dares to face Damalynas?"

"I do not know if I am a *busybody*," said Hiya, "but you endangered the wife of my master, the Exalted One. I have come to

remove you.”

Damalynas squinted indignantly at her with one eye. “Are you serious?! Remove *the* Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight? By yourself? Gimme a break!” She pointed her arm at the djinn, ready to release her magic. “You’ll have plenty of time to regret picking a fight with me in *Hell!*”

Damalynas chanted, and a burst of magic issued from the magic circle in front of her hand: the highest form of the spell Lightning Bullet. Lightning, overwhelmingly powerful, surged towards Hiya...and the next moment, it vanished. Hiya was still standing there unhurt, as calm as ever. Damalynas drew back unconsciously. “Y-You... How did you—that was top-tier magic!”

“There is no magic in the world that will affect me,” said Hiya, the very corners of her lips turning up into a small smile. “Excepting only the magic of Lord Flio, the Exalted One.”

Damalynas clicked her tongue in annoyance. *That woman... I can't deny that she doesn't seem to be an ordinary person. Claiming immunity to spells must be a bluff, but she did counter my black magic...* “Then how about *this!*” she said as the Hero-beast roared and dove at Hiya.

“Ah,” said Hiya, with an air of impassive exasperation. “Your magic fails so you resort to might. How dull.”

“Hmph! Don’t think that’s all I have up my sleeve!” said Damalynas. An array of Fire Lance spells appeared all around the Hero, flying murderously towards Hiya as the Hero bore down from the sky. “It’s a little harder to deal with might and magic *together*, isn’t it?” She laughed loudly, sure of her victory.

But Hiya just continued to stare blankly back at her. “Can we be done with this foolishness?” she said. She raised her hand, facing her palm towards the Hero and the fire flying towards her. A powerful cyclone rose from the ground, swallowing up the Hero as the Fire Lances simply vanished. The Hero was sent flying, then landed in a heap behind Damalynas.

“What...?” Damalynas was aghast. She began to tremble fearfully as she looked at Hiya. “Who... What *are* you?”

“My name is Hiya,” she said, bowing politely. “I am the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, servant of Lord Flio the Exalted One.”

At that name, the color drained from Damalynas’s face. *I know of her... She's the legendary djinn, the supreme master of all light and darkness magic... They say that no spells a human can cast will work on her.* She shook her head violently. “No, no, *no!* It can’t be! It just can’t! Even if it’s true, *I* am the one who has transcended the limits of human reason! *I* am the Grand Magus of Midnight! *I* am Damalynas! *I*

will *not* be defeated!" She raised her voice to a shout as she sent a dark aura out from both her arms. It enveloped the fallen Hero and seemed to absorb into his body. The Hero's monstrous form was already enormous, but he started to grow larger and larger as he stood back on his feet, roaring so violently that it seemed to shake the heavens.

Deep in the bowels of this planet there existed an abyss known as the Dark World. Damalynas now drew on its power, forcibly claiming it for herself and pouring it into the Hero's transformed body.

"Perhaps, djinn, you are a being beyond humankind. But *I* have gone beyond human wisdom! I will show you why I am permitted to bear the title 'Grand Magus of Midnight'!" With her beast behind her, Damalynas cackled.

But Hiya remained unaffected, her expression unchanged. "Humans have a lot to say when they're terrified, it seems," she said, spreading both arms wide. "That being said, you *are* a little tougher than most. I may have to show you a little of—"

Suddenly, Flio's voice came from behind her. "Hiya," he said, "I'm done with work. Ready to get going?"

Damalynas glared at the intruder. "A common human! You think you can get in my way?!"

"I'm not trying to get in your way," he said. "But you know, it's *dangerous* to use magic like that in a crowded city." He held out his hand and in an instant Damalynas's black magic ceased entirely. With the flow of magic stopped, the Hero could not maintain his state and gradually began to collapse.

"E-Exalted One!" Hiya fell to the ground, prostrating herself with intense contrition. "Please forgive your wretched, incompetent servant! For failing to take care of this pest before you returned, I deserve to die ten thousand deaths! Punish me however you see fit!"

"Hey, hey," said Flio, pulling her to her feet and forcing a smile. "There's no need for all that."

Damalynas was frozen with terror. *No... No way. This can't be. That was the highest-level black magic... Magic beyond the level a human could ever use. But he dispelled it in an instant. He dismissed the power for which I abandoned humanity like it was nothing..* Once again, her body began to shake with fear.

"Exalted One," said Hiya, "would you be so kind as to allow me to finish this?" She raised her hands over her head, where a great magic circle appeared. "Fall!" she shouted, and the black magic inside the Hero's and Tsuya's bodies began to seep out, sucked into Hiya's circle.

"No..." said Damalynas, but in the same instant her consciousness was sucked out of Tsuya's body along with her magic. Soon, all that was left was the Golden-Haired Hero, once again in his human body,

and Tsuya, released from Damalynas's control, lying unconscious on the ground. The black magic that was absorbed by Hiya's circle condensed and became a black gem on the palm of her hand.

"Be honored," she said. "You shall exist eternally as part of my body—the body of the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, servant of Flio the Exalted One." She swallowed the gem whole.

"Are you done, Hiya?" asked Rys.

Hiya turned to face her, smiling gently. "Yes, Mistress," she said. "I am truly sorry to have kept you and the Exalted One waiting."

Flio nodded. "Okay," he said. "Then let's see to the injured people and broken buildings, and *then* get going." He headed towards a group of people who had been injured in the fight.

The Princess had been standing there the whole time, watching the scene unfold like it was a play. Indeed, she had almost forgotten that what was happening before her eyes was real. Everything happened so fast that she couldn't keep up with it. But when Flio left her line of sight, she snapped out of her daze. "W-Well, first of all, arrest the Hero! And then we must follow those people!" At her words, the knights (who had been healed by Flio) placed Tsuya and the Hero, still unconscious, under arrest.

One of the knights found Flio and his companions having a meal at a restaurant in the city and reported back to the Princess, who instantly came running. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart," she said, bowing deeply, "for saving our kingdom from peril. I would like to acknowledge you as the True Hero and invite you to the castle." She bowed once more.

"Your Highness, it's really not such a big deal," said Flio, turning to face her, "but I'm sorry... I don't think I have what it takes to be a Hero. Besides, my current lifestyle suits me much better." He put an arm around Rys's shoulder, pulling her in gently.

Epilogue

Not ready to give up, the Princess continued to pay Flio visit after visit, asking him to take up the role of True Hero, but Flio simply refused. Her passionate words did reach him eventually, however, and in the end he caved and let her know that if there was ever something she needed, he would do his best to help. The Princess was so happy that she was moved to tears.

She had been so desperate to secure his allegiance that at one point she said, quite without thinking, that she would “offer him her heart and body if he wished.”

“You *scum*,” Rys growled. “Lusting after a married man, are you? *Hmm?*” It took all four of Balirossa’s party to hold her back from attacking.

The Golden-Haired Hero and Tsuya, having been arrested, were sent off to the castle, but they broke free en route and vanished to gods-know-where. The Princess circulated wanted posters for the two throughout the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and even to the neighboring kingdoms, offering a bounty for the pair’s arrest.

◇One Day, in Flio’s House◇

“All right,” said Flio, “let’s head to town!”

Rys followed after him. “Watch the house while we’re gone please, Hiya.”

“As you wish, Exalted One, Mistress. I shall clean the house and do the laundry. I will also stand guard while you are away.”

Hiya saw them off as they left. As they passed through the pasture, they happened upon Balirossa and Byleri. Balirossa was riding on a horse monster. When they saw Flio and Rys, they cheerfully approached.

“Oh, are you on your way out?” said Balirossa.

“Like, have a good one!” said Byleri.

“Hey! See ya around!” Blossom came over from the nearby garden. She had also noticed Flio and Rys leaving.

Flio looked at everyone who had come to see them off. “Good work, everyone,” he said. “Since we’re heading out, is there anything you need from the city?”

“There’s no need to bother with that,” said Balirossa. “It would be

disrespectful to push our errands off on the master of the house.” Byleri and Blossom nodded.

But Flio said, “There’s really no need to stand on ceremony. At least let me get you some souvenirs. Isn’t there anything you want?”

“No, no, no.” Balirossa shook her head. “It would really be discourteous...”

“If you won’t tell us what you want for a souvenir,” said Rys, smiling mischievously, “then no dinner for you tonight. How about that?”

“Wha—?” Balirossa (not really meaning to) cried out piteously. “That’s not fair!” Everyone had a good laugh at her reaction.

At this point, Belano darted out of the door. After waiting for a moment, she finally greeted them. “I need to go to school,” she said before pausing once more. “Can I come with you two?”

With Belano now in the mix, the group continued to chat for a while. Flio and Rys looked happily at the other four. “It seems like our family grew quite large at some point,” remarked Flio.

“That’s quite all right, my love,” said Rys. “It’s nothing we can’t handle with your omnicapable Rys in command. But more importantly...” She suddenly blushed red and began to fidget. “I... I want to have a child with you soon.” She closed her eyes tight.

Flio leaned over to kiss his wife on the lips, though he was self conscious in front of the other four. Balirossa’s gang did their best to give the two a little privacy and deliberately looked away, for which Flio was very grateful. The two continued to embrace and kiss one another for some time, locking their bodies together under the clear sky.

Sybe watched them from the window, making snuffling noises.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow

CONTENT WARNING: The section within the filled diamond symbols (◆ ◆ ◆) contains a depiction of sexual violence that may be upsetting to some readers. Please use personal discretion if you are sensitive to content of this nature.

Deep in an unknown forest, the Golden-Haired Hero surveyed his surroundings from behind a great tree. He breathed a sigh of relief when he didn't see anyone nearby. It had been several days since he had somehow managed to escape his escort meant to take him back to Klyrode Castle after the business with the Grand Magus of Midnight. Klyrode had put quite a valuable price on their heads and sent pursuers after them, so the Golden-Haired Hero and Tsuya continued to stay on the move as fugitives.

"My Lord Hero," said Tsuya, fatigue evident in her voice. "We've been running through the forest for three whole days... I'm tired..." She sat on the ground, utterly fatigued.

The Hero grunted in agreement as he sat down next to Tsuya. Once again he sighed with relief. "I can't believe they chased us as far as this," he said. "Persistent, these louts."

Ever since their escape, the Hero and Tsuya had been fleeing for three days without rest. No matter how much they would have preferred to find an inn, every settlement they found had posted wanted posters of the two of them. They had no choice but to camp deep in the mountains. Wherever they went, they had to keep fleeing from the shadow of the Princess's hunters, far past the limits of their endurance.

The Golden-Haired Hero turned to look at Tsuya. She was sitting on the ground with her feet planted in front of her, her shoulders drooping so much that her head was touching her knees. Her breathing was ragged. It didn't seem like she was getting up any time soon.

The Hero sighed. "Well then," he said, "let's take a break." He closed his eyes and turned his head up to the heavens. They were far from the road in a part of the woods where the trees grew thick and dark. *They probably won't find us here for a while...*

Still breathing heavily from exertion, the Hero reached into the Bottomless Bag that King Klyrode had given him when he had first

been summoned as part of his equipment for his quest to slay the Dark One. “At least they didn’t take *this* away when we were arrested,” he said as he pulled out his Bag of Endless Water. “They put anything I might need on a monster hunt in here. We should be good for a while.” He proffered the water bag to Tsuya. “Go ahead.”

“Oh...” Tsuya started. “I’ll have a drink after you do, my Lord Hero.”

But the Hero insisted. “There’s no need to ration this, you know. This bag is powered by a water gem. It’ll last halfway till forever.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Tsuya mumbled, shaking her head. “It simply wouldn’t do for me to go ahead of you!”

“Honestly, don’t worry about that,” the Hero said, offering the bag once more. “Here.”

“O-Okay...” she said, taking it from his hands. “Then I suppose I’ll help myself!” She immediately brought the bag to her mouth and started to gulp it down. She had been dreadfully thirsty.

What a strange woman, the Golden-Haired Hero thought. *Even now, in these circumstances, she calls me “Hero” and treats me with deference...* He smiled, thin-lipped as he looked at her. Then he took a look at the bag on his belt. *I should probably double-check this. We aren’t at the end of the road, after all.* A window appeared as soon as he touched it, listing off the contents of the bag. The Hero squinted as he read. “We don’t have that many rations left. And there’s almost no money in here...” Thanks to the bag of endless water there was no need to worry about thirst, but seeing how little food and gold they had made the Hero suddenly feel dizzy.

Well, he told himself, *dwelling on it isn’t going to put food in our bellies.* He steadied his emotions and looked in the bag again. “There are some spare weapons, and... Oh, what’s this?” He tilted his head as he saw the item at the end of the list: “A treasure box?”

“Oh!” said Tsuya. “Didn’t you stuff that in the bag when we were sneaking into the sanctuary, my Lord Hero? I remember you said we should take at least one as a memento...”

The Hero thought for a while and then struck his fist on the flat of his palm, remembering. “Now that you mention it, I did! Everything that happened after that was so *insane*—with the djinn and the Midnight Grand Magus lady—that I must have forgotten!” He took the chest out from his bag. It appeared on the ground in front of them, a lavishly-decorated treasure chest from the castle.

“If we manage to sell whatever’s inside, we might be able to get the funds we need for our lives as fugitives,” he said, putting his hands on the chest. It was locked, but it wasn’t hard for the Hero to force it open. “Hm?” he said.

“What?” added Tsuya. Both their eyes went wide and round.

Inside the chest were two shovels.

“...Really?” said the Hero. “Nothing but shovels?”

“Indeed...” said Tsuya. “It seems to only be shovels.”



They checked and double-checked, but there really was nothing else in the box. “Incredible,” said the Hero. “Of all the boxes I could have picked, it had to be the one full of shovels. Absolutely incredible...” Dejected, he halfheartedly stared at the shovels. They seemed fairly solidly built, but other than that they looked entirely ordinary. “But why in the world would somebody at the castle put shovels in a treasure chest?” Curious, he cast the spell Analysis.

A window popped up:

◇Item Name: Drilldozer Shovel

Every other field read, “**Analysis Failed.**”

“At my level, the most I can get is its name,” he said, laughing bitterly at himself as he took one of the shovels in hand. “Drilldozer Shovel, is it? Well, maybe this will be useful after all.” He gave his new shovel a smile. “I’m counting on you, partner!”

Suddenly, a new window appeared.

New Skill Mastered: Dig

“What?” The Hero looked at the window, confused.

“Diiig?” wondered Tsuya, looking at the window over the Hero’s shoulder. “I’ve never heard of that skill before.”

“So... What can we do with this?”

“I suppose it’ll help you dig deep holes, perhaps?” Tsuya mused, her right index finger resting on her cheek.

“I guessed as much,” the Hero replied. “But I mean, what good is digging holes?”

Tsuya pressed both hands to her forehead, deep in thought.

“Hmm... Well...” she said, and then grinned all of a sudden. “Oh, I know! You can make pitfall traps! Maybe we can catch something to eat!”

The Hero had folded his arms, deep in thought when Tsuya made her suggestion. “I see...” he said. “Now that you mention it, I suppose that is something I could do...” He took to his feet. “Let’s go a bit further into the forest, just to be safe, and then I’ll try making some pitfalls.”

Tsuya stood up to follow him. “Okaaay!” she said. “I feel quite a bit better after that break.”

“Then let’s get moving!” The Hero took the water bag from Tsuya and took a single deep swig, gulping it down all at once before returning it to his bag.

He was just about to get moving when Tsuya stopped him. “Oh,

my Lord Hero,” she called. “Um, are we going to leave the treasure box behind?”

“Oh, well, it’s empty isn’t it? It won’t do us much good.”

“Maybe,” she said. “I suppose that’s true...”

“What’s wrong?” the Hero asked. “Is something bothering you?”

“No,” she started. “Well, not really. It’s just one little thing. But that treasure box,” she hesitated, “it’s pretty, isn’t it? The way it sparkles? I wonder if someone might pay a good price for it...”

“That’s ridiculous!” the Golden-Haired Hero scoffed. “There was nothing in there but two shovels, right? Why in the world would they use a valuable treasure box to store *shovels*?”

“Aaah?!” Said Tsuya, taken aback. “O-Oh. Yes, I suppose that makes sense. You’re so smart, my Lord Heroooo.” She nodded emphatically at his words, clapping her hands together.

“Well, there you have it. Let’s get going, Tsuya!”

“Yes, my Lord Heroooo!”

“Wait.” The Hero hesitated. “You keep calling me your ‘Lord Hero.’”

“Of course!” she said. “My Lord Hero is my Lord Hero, after aaall!”

“I’ve heard there’ve been a lot of Heroes in this world, so that in itself shouldn’t be a problem...” the Hero mused. “I know! From now on, why don’t you call me ‘Hero Gold-Hair!’”

“Yes, my Lord Heroooo!” Tsuya answered. “If that is what you wish to be called, I certainly don’t mind.” She cleared her throat. “Now, my Lord Hero Gold-Hair, shall we be off?”

He grunted affirmatively. “Let’s get going, Tsuya!”

The two of them nodded their heads and headed off deeper into the woods.

◇Days Later◇

Mimew of the Adventurers’ Association felt her eyes go wide at the sight of the resplendently decorated treasure box set before her. “This is quite a find!” she said. “I can’t believe you *just happened* to stumble upon something like this.”

The young woodcutter who had found the box stood next to her. “Is it really that amazing?” he asked.

“Mister Marcobia,” Mimew responded, more and more excited as she spoke, “‘amazing’ doesn’t begin to cover it! Do you *see* these gems embedded along the sides? These are magic gems—every one of them! Exceptionally high purity too! Let’s see...” She folded her arms as she considered the chest. “Five gold each wouldn’t be out of the question for gems like this.”

At those words, the onlookers suddenly began to clamor among

themselves.

“Holy... That box must have twenty magic gems on it...”

“Wh-What?! So then the whole thing would be worth a hundred gold?!”

“Kind of makes me feel mortified by how little I earn hunting C-Rank monsters...”

Mimew put the crowd out of mind. “Tell me, Mister Marcobia,” she said. “Where did you find something like this?”

“That’s the thing...” he responded. “I was just in my usual spot in the mountains behind my village. I went there to cut wood like always, and this thing was just lying there in a thicket.”

“I wonder if some bandits stole the box and forced it open on the spot,” Mimew muttered. “They must have had no idea how valuable the box itself was.” She shook her head. “Oh, excuse me. I’ll prepare your payment—please wait just a moment,” she said and headed into the back.

“Do you think there are more boxes like that lying around?” wondered one of the adventurers. As soon as the words were spoken, the adventurers rushed into the streets, heading for the nearby forest as fast as they could.

Marcobia watched them go, a dry smile on his face. *Yeah, he thought. I had that idea too. Looked all over before I came here... Well, I wish them luck.*



A few days later, the Princess of Klyrode was sitting on her throne, listening to a report from one of the guards. “A treasure box? From our own sanctuary?” she echoed.

“There’s no doubt about it,” said the guard. “We’ve just retrieved the box from the Adventurers’ Association, but our early investigations confirm that it could only have been removed by that Golden-Haired Hero.”

“And the contents... Were you able to retrieve those?” The Princess was worried.

“I’m terribly sorry, Your Highness. He must have taken them...”

“I see...” she slumped her shoulders. “They were the Drilldozer Shovels he took, were they not? The legendary items...”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Legends say that once upon a time the Drilldozer Shovel was used to create pitfall traps so devious that not even the Dark One could escape them...” The Princess nervously bit her lip as she worried. “Our highest priority must be to prepare for another attack from the Dark Army,” she continued. “But I want to take what soldiers we can spare and dispatch them to search the area around where the

Adventurers' Association says the box was found. We must apprehend the Golden-Haired Hero and his companion with utmost haste, and retrieve the treasure he stole."

"Yes, Your Highness! I will send the order out at once." The guard bowed deeply as the Princess finished, and left the throne room.

The Princess sighed deeply once she was alone. *If only we had acknowledged Flio as the Hero from the start, how much easier this would be...* she lamented. *The djinn would have never been unsealed, the Grand Magus of Midnight would have never broken free, and when the Dark One attacked, the Hero would have driven his armies away as if it were nothing.* Once more she sighed, and shook her head. *No... There's no use dwelling on such things. And after all, I am complicit in naming that golden-haired man as the Hero...* She sighed a third time and sat back heavily, staring up at the ceiling.

Still, she thought, Lord Flio did give his word that he would cooperate with the kingdom... That must suffice for a silver lining in all of this, I suppose.



While the Princess was busy dealing with the erstwhile Hero, Flio was alone with Belano behind his house. "Now," he said, "try it like I taught you." Belano nodded, and focused on the wooden stake driven into the ground in front of them. She held out both hands, concentrated deeply, and began to chant. A magic circle appeared in front of her. She focused her senses.

"...Fire Lance."

A single magic spear erupted from the circle. It was on the small side, but it burned brightly as it flew at the target. It impacted the top portion of the stake with considerable force, skewering it and sending the tip flying off. Flio raised his fists in the air, crying out happily. "You did it, Belano!" he said, a big grin on his face. "Your first Fire Lance!"

Belano turned red in her cheeks, and mumbled, "I mean...it's only one spear, though." She raised her eyes. In front of her she saw Flio, as happy at her first successful attack spell as if it was his own achievement. Seeing him like that, Belano couldn't help smiling happily herself.



Belano was sitting in her room, facing her desk. When they had first moved in, Belano and the rest of Balirossa's party slept in beds lined up in the living room, but at some point Flio had extended the house's floor plan using magic, making it about one and a half times

as large as it had been. Now, everyone had their own private room.

On her desk was the textbook and reference book Belano had been using for her class at the College of Magic. On the wall above her desk was a painting of a young Belano, with one man on either side of her. "Father..." she whispered, looking up at the painting. "Brother..."

Belano's mother had died shortly after her birth. She had been brought up by her father and her brother, who was ten years older than her. Both were mages working for Klyrode Castle. Her mother, too, had been a witch. Belano was born with a high affinity for magic, and her father and brother had taught her how to cast spells. They were both very kind teachers.

However, the day came when the two of them didn't come home. They had gone with the knights of the castle to fight a salamander who had been attacking nearby villages and lost their lives.

"Father, Brother," she repeated. "You know, Lord Flio killed that salamander for us." She smiled. "He's amazing, Lord Flio. His magic is incredible, and he's so kind... I was a failure of a witch, but he was so patient in teaching me. He's a lot like you, I think..." She spread out the fingers of her right hand as she spoke. She had six rings on her middle three fingers, presents from Flio to increase her magic reserves. Belano took one ring off her right ring finger and held it up to her eye, looking at it fondly.

"Father, Brother," she said. "Please watch over me...and Lord Flio..." She slipped Flio's ring back on...on her left ring finger.

Belano?

"Eeek!" Belano felt chills run up her back. She thought she'd heard a voice call her name, dark as if it was seething up from the very bowels of the earth. She panicked, looking around her room. But she was alone, no matter how hard she looked. *That voice...* she thought, her whole body trembling. *Didn't it sound like Lady Rys?*

Afterwards, she returned the ring back to her right hand.

She crawled into her bed to sleep, but that night she kept moaning in her sleep, troubled with nightmares of running from figures of Rys wearing a truly demonic expression.



While Belano was wrestling with her nightmares, Balirossa popped out of bed with a start. "Aah!" she screamed. Only in her lower undergarments, Balirossa searched the room carefully, breathing heavily. Before long, she sighed in relief. She was alone, in her own bedroom. "A dream... It was only a dream. I'm so...so glad..." She collapsed back onto her bed, staring at the ceiling. "Why... Why do I keep having that same dream, night after night...?"

Hiding her face in her hands, Balirossa kept muttering to herself

incoherently.

◇Balirossa's Dream◇

"You look beautiful, Balirossa." Gholl, the Dark One, was facing Balirossa with a big smile on his face. She stood beside him, wearing a black wedding dress as the bride of the Dark One. Before them kneeled the arrayed forces of the Dark Army, Uliminas at their head.

"Lord Gholl, Lady Balirossa, congratulations on your meowrriage!" she said. "To celebrate, we purromise to conquer the world, and offer it to you as a wedding puresent!"

"Hrm," said Gholl. "You'd best start soon."

"Meow!" Uliminas stood, and at once the demons arrayed behind her also took to their feet, perfectly on cue. Uliminas turned to face the forces under her command. "All right, mew lot! We set out at meownce! The world will be ours! Are mew with me?!"

The army all cried at once in response. "Ma'am, yes, ma'am!" and then, "Long live the Dark One! Long live Queen Balirossa!" Voices praising the two came from all directions.

Gholl surveyed his army, and then turned with deliberate slowness to look at Balirossa. "Oh Balirossa," he said, "when we conquer the world, I will gladly offer it to you. Although, it is poor tribute to your beauty." He took her in his arms, princess-style.

"Oh, Lord Gholl..." said Balirossa, tears of joy streaming down her red cheeks. "You make me so happy." She closed her eyes.

"Hrm... I love you, Balirossa." He leaned in, pressing his lips against—

"Aah!" Balirossa screamed and jumped out of bed when she remembered what had happened in her dream. "The... The Dark One! It's been a long time since he was visiting our house every day, so why am I still having dreams like that? And *every* night...?" She continued mumbling to herself, recalling the scene from earlier.

Although I must admit, she thought, he does have a rather nice face... If he were to...

"Aah!" Balirossa screamed again, interrupting her train of thought. "This is wrong. This is *so* wrong! Why am I thinking things like that? Even if he *does* have a nice face... Have I gone *mad*?" She collapsed back onto her bed, mumbling to herself as she crawled under the covers. "I'm going to sleep! Just sleep! No more dreams! I'm sleeping! *Sleeping!*" She closed her eyes tight as she repeated the words to herself over and over.



Blossom was up early in the morning, rising before dawn to go tend the garden. "I feel like I heard some strange sounds from Belano and Balirossa's rooms," she said to herself, tilting her head curiously. Blossom's room was in the same hallway as Balirossa's and Belano's. The rooms were fairly well soundproofed, but they had been sleeping with the windows open, so some sounds from the neighboring rooms got in.

"Balirossa screams over and over like that pretty often for some reason...but Belano is Belano. It sounds like she's been having a nightmare. I should go check on her, I guess." Sitting up on her bed, she folded her arms and glanced at the left and right walls of her room. After a little while, she began to perk up. "Well, if it's bad, I'm sure Lord Flio will do something about it. Probably no need for me to barge in."

Having convinced herself not to get involved, she grabbed the clothes she had left draped over the back of her chair and put them on. She headed out of her room and down the stairs. When she reached the living room, Sybe ran up to her, snuffling happily. It seemed to have noticed her coming down. An ordinary horned rabbit would generally run on four legs, but Sybe was originally a psychobear and ran on its two hind legs.

"Hey, good morning Sybe! I'm always happy to get a greeting from you." Blossom beamed happily and picked Sybe up in her arms, rubbing the rabbit against her cheeks. "Oh, I know! Today's harvest day for our garden. Do you wanna help out?" Sybe snuffled once affirmatively. Blossom put Sybe down, and Sybe transformed back to its original form on its own.

Blossom was tall for a woman, but next to Sybe at its full height of almost three meters, she looked like a petite girl. "Right, thanks for the assistance," she said, looking up at Sybe as he grew to tower above her, grinning. "I'll ask Rys to cook up lots of meat for you when we're done."

Before long, the two had reached Blossom's garden, Blossom shouldering her tools and Sybe pulling along the cart. "The vegetables I planted have been ripening one after another ever since we moved the house," she said, spirits high as she took one of the many baskets from the cart and headed towards the vegetable field. Sybe saw her off, and arranged the baskets neatly, one by one. When it finished its task, it flopped down next to the cart, staring out at the garden.

The garden was full of vegetables growing as tall as two or three meters high, dense enough that Sybe couldn't make out Blossom among them. Its nose was sensitive, however. It kept track of her general area by smell, looking after her as she worked.

Suddenly, it could hear Blossom's voice calling for it. "Sybe!" she

said. “Come over here!” Sybe grabbed one of the baskets, balancing it on its head as it headed off towards the middle of the field. There were footpaths in the garden between the towering vegetables, but Sybe’s body was too large for them to be of any use. It just barreled on through carrying the basket, well used to this. It reached Blossom, along with the first basket she had brought, now overflowing with vegetables.

“All right, you take these,” she said smiling, holding up her hands, “and I’ll take your new basket in exchange!”

“Gwaor!” Sybe cried out and nodded. First it placed the empty basket in Blossom’s arms, and then it hoisted the full basket above its head. Blossom watched as the psychobear did an about-face.

“I’ll call for you when I’ve filled another basket, so you just wait there, okay?” she said and squatted over, returning to her harvest.

Eventually dawn came, the sun just beginning to crest the horizon. “Raohr!” said Sybe, taking the final basket from Blossom and balancing it on its head.

Blossom slowly rose to her feet. “And I suppose that does it for today’s work,” she said, stretching her arms wide. “Right! We’re done with the harvest, so let’s take a quick once-over of the garden and head home.” Blossom left the field behind Sybe, looking around as she did. For about a minute afterwards, she glanced around, inspecting the area. “Mhm, everything looks good,” she said, and along with Sybe started back towards the house.

Sybe’s cart was full up with baskets of vegetables. “But really,” Blossom said, “having you here to do the heavy lifting is a big help. I could only do maybe *half* of this on my own.” Amiably, she slapped Sybe on the back.

Sybe cried out happily, “Gwor!” and picked Blossom up with its left arm.

“Wha— Hey! Sybe!” she shouted, startled. But Sybe lifted her up and placed her on its shoulders. “Aha... Well, all right,” she said, wrapping her arms around Sybe’s big head so she wouldn’t fall as she looked around. “It’s a good view from up here, Sybe,” she said. “Right... Why don’t we take a quick walk before we head home? Since I’m already up here and all.”

“Gworawr!” cried Sybe, nodding just slightly.



“Huh?” Byleri stopped in her tracks, blinking curiously. She’d been pulling her cart through the pasture between Flio’s house and Blossom’s garden. “Um, where are Blossom and Sybe going?”

Until a second ago, Blossom and Sybe had been heading straight

towards the house, until they suddenly changed directions off towards the mountains. Byleri watched them go, puzzled over their behavior.

She was interrupted from her thoughts by the sound of a loud whinny coming from the stables. "Oh, right, sorry!" she called back. "I'm coming!" She pulled her cart behind her into the stables. Inside were the horse monsters she had been raising: the crystal-hoof horse with its two heads and transparent hooves, and the snake-hawk horses, with the wings of a hawk and the head of a snake... Her herd had six heads total, counting the double-headed horse twice. Some of them were originally savage monsters, but Flio had bound them to Byleri with his Subjugation spell, making them quite obedient.

She would sometimes lend her horses out to merchants to hitch their wagons to. However, lately she had been absolutely swamped with requests. Her horses were very fast, often reaching their destination well ahead of schedule. And if the wagon was ever attacked by monsters, Byleri's horses could fight them off. She had become quite famous, it seemed.

That being said, Byleri was willful, and would not take every client who asked. She insisted that her horses be given time to properly rest, and would only lend them when they were good and ready. As a result, they were always in top form when they worked, and performed excellently.

"I'm here!" she called. "Ready for breakfast?" She took the pails loaded on her handcart and gave them to her horses in turn. In each was one head's portion of food, handmade by Byleri herself to suit the tastes of each, with a good balance of fruits and vegetables. The horses stuck their heads out of the partition, making sure to bow politely to Byleri before tending to their meals.

Byleri bowed. "You're all, like, very welcome!" she said, happily. She was grinning ear-to-ear. "And, here *you* go!" Finally, she reached the last horses, the two snake-hawk horse brothers. She let out a heavy breath and wiped the sweat from her brow. The pair bayed happily and bowed politely like the others. They flicked out their long tongues, licking Byleri on her cheeks. Because they had snake heads in place of a horse's, their tongues were very thin and long.

"Oh!" she said, walking closer and hugging both of their heads close to her. "You two are such sweethearts, aren't you?" Suddenly, she felt the younger one's tongue sliding down her back. "Hyah?!" she cried out, startled by the sensation.

That was only the beginning.

The snake-hawk horses mistook Byleri's cry for a cry of joy, and both began to run their tongues all over her back, doing their best to make their mistress happy. "Hyaaaaaaaah!" she cried in the same weird voice, bending backwards at the uncomfortable sensation. Still

thinking that she was enjoying it, the horses licked her more and more fervently.

Byleri twisted her body, looking for some way to escape from the snake-hawk horses' tongues, but they were too flexible. All she manage to do was put herself in a position where their tongues were lapping at her chest instead. "Hyaaohhh..." she moaned, her face blushing as she curled up into a ball to protect herself. The brothers kept licking. "H-Help? Somebody?!" She tried desperately to call out, but the sensation of their tongues on her chest was too much. It was all she could manage to make a faint, feeble voice.

Suddenly, she heard a man's voice. "I told you Byleri," he said. "In times like these, you need to look the horse in the eyes and tell it to stop, right?"

"H-Huh?!" Byleri looked up, startled by the unexpected voice. There, interposed between herself and the snake-hawk horses, was Flio. He was holding up his hand to the horses, signifying them to stop. They were already pulling in their tongues and drawing back.

"L-Lord Flio..." Byleri said, sinking down to the floor. "Th-Thanks."

"If you're done feeding the horses, shall we get back to the house? I think Rys is cooking us breakfast." He looked as cool and relaxed as always.

"Oh, um, could you wait a minute?" Byleri said, walking towards the snake-hawk horses. They were eating despondently, worried that Flio was angry with them. She began to gently pat their heads. "Only lick me on the *cheek*, okay? Promise? I know, I know, you're such good boys, aren't you?" She turned to each of them in turn, and they rubbed their cheeks against hers happily, with no sign of their earlier despondency.

Byleri really is incredible with horses, Flio thought as he watched the scene unfold with his usual cool smile.



While Flio and Byleri were in the stables, Hiya was standing in the corner of the living room, her arms folded and eyes closed. At that moment, she was projecting herself into her own mindscape—the world inside her head. Everything around her was pure white. And before her, a single woman sat cross-legged on the floor.

"Didn't you swallow me whole and destroy me or something?" scoffed Damalynas.

Hiya opened her narrow eyes, gazing at the woman. "This is the mindscape of the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, myself. I have captured your soul and bound it here to me."

Damalynas laughed, almost as if the thought entertained her.

“Oh? You’re not even going to allow me to die? You are quite vindictive, Miss Djinn.” She kept laughing for a bit, but Hiya only stared at her, regarding her with a cold smile. With the djinn giving no reaction, it wasn’t long before Damalynas cut out the laughter. “Well? So you’ve bound my soul to this world. What then? Are you gonna do something with me?”

At this, Hiya merely smiled. “I think I shall ask you to be my training partner.”

“What? Training?”

“Indeed. Training.”

Damalynas looked dubious as Hiya extended her right arm towards her. “Wha... What?!” Damalynas’s body suddenly was no longer sitting on the floor, but floating through space. A large bed appeared next to Hiya, and Damalynas was carelessly thrown onto it. Her limbs extended out to the corners of the bed where they were held fast by leather straps, in a diagonal cross shape.

“Wait!” cried Damalynas. “Wait! What do you need to tie me to a *bed* for?!” She had a bad feeling about where this was going.

Hiya rose up to the bed, and extended her right arm towards the bound Damalynas. “Every night, the Exalted One I serve entwines his body with his wife’s in a passionate exchange.” She waved her hand, and Damalynas’s clothing vanished, leaving her stark naked. “I, Hiya, only know secondhand of lovemaking. I am very interested to try it myself. I would like you to serve as my training partner in this, for the sake of intellectual curiosity.”



“Hey wait!” Damalynas cried frantically as Hiya drew gradually closer. “What are you even *talking* about?” She was speaking as quickly as she could. “We’re both girls! What do you mean ‘try it yourself’? Sorry, but I’m not into that!”

As she protested, Hiya’s own clothing vanished before her eyes, revealing her exceptionally slender, well-proportioned body. Hiya brought her hand to the lower part of her body, and something that looked like a man’s penis suddenly emerged from her pelvis, growing larger and larger until it was enormous. Damalynas went pallid. “*Wait!* What is *that*?! Did you *seriously* just—”

“I am Hiya...the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. I am a being above sexual dimorphism.” She mounted Damalynas as she spoke.

“*You...* Just because you have the parts doesn’t mean it’s *okay!* And more to the point, that’s *way too big!* There’s no way it’ll fit! Please... Please, let me go!” pleaded Damalynas, tears in her eyes.

Hiya smirked. “Don’t worry. According to the information I have acquired, it is only supposed to hurt the first time.”

“You *idiot!* It’s *not* my first time, but the size of that thing is just too—mmffh!” Hiya kissed her, blocking her mouth and cutting off her words. Slowly, she lowered herself between Damalynas’s legs. With no warm-up whatsoever, she began to move. Damalynas screamed into Hiya’s mouth. “Mffhhaaaaaaaaaaahh?!”

◇Minutes Later◇

Hiya’s arms were folded. She tilted her arms, puzzled. “Now then,” she said. “What could have gone wrong...” She stared over at Damalynas. Even though Hiya had hardly done anything, Damalynas had fallen unconscious. She lay there, her body twitching.

“Perhaps it is too much to expect myself to be able to perform as well as the Exalted One my first time,” she said, glancing at Damalynas as she thought the matter through. “Truly, this is a mysterious art.”



“Hiya? Is something wrong?” Rys looked worried. Hiya had been standing for some time in the corner of the living room, her eyes closed, not moving. Some time passed, and then Hiya slightly opened her eyes, barely peeking out under her eyelids.

“No,” she said. “Nothing is wrong, O wife of the Exalted One.” She bowed deeply.

“Really? All right, then. But if there is something, don’t hesitate to

ask for help. It's no use trying to do everything on your own." Rys smiled. "If you're looking for something to do, would you care to help me? I'm about to start on breakfast."

"I would be happy to assist you," Hiya said and followed Rys into the kitchen.



The two of them spent a few dozen minutes in the kitchen, Rys busying herself here and there preparing the meal. Behind her, Hiya was assisting with her preparations.

"Mistress," said Hiya, "am I to serve this food?"

Rys took a quick taste of the soup and glanced over at Hiya. "I suppose. Would you portion out the stir-fry and take it to the living room? The rest will be a little longer."

"As you wish. I shall be quick." Hiya bowed and moved the meat and vegetable stir-fry from its platter to a number of smaller plates. While she was busy, Rys took another taste of the soup and cocked her head.

Strange. I feel like this is missing something. Rys gave the contents of the stockpot another good stir and tasted it again. *Yes... Something is definitely missing.* Rys stood in thought for a short while, and then picked up the stockpot with both hands. "Excuse me," she said. "I'll be right back."

"Mistress?" Hiya said, but Rys didn't even wait to hear her response. She darted out of the house with incredible force, partially transformed into her lupine form. Within minutes, she alighted in front of a building—The Mileno School for the Culinary Arts, Houghtow Campus.

Rys transformed back into her full human form and knocked on the door with one hand, holding the massive stockpot in the other.

"Yes yes, I'm coming—oh, if it isn't Rys! Good morning!" The rabbit woman who answered the door smiled when she saw who it was.

"Miss Japyona," said Rys, "I'm sorry to bother you so early in the morning... It's just, I tried to make the minestrone you taught us in yesterday's lesson, and it came out wrong. Would you please help me?" She held out the pot for her teacher.

"Hmm. Let's see..." Japyona gave the soup a stir with the ladle sticking out of the pot and brought it to her lips. "Ahh," she said. "Rys, you have the proportions wrong."

"The...proportions?" said Rys, blinking in confusion. "But I used the same proportions you did..."

Japyona wiggled her ears and held up her index finger, gesturing as she lectured. "The recipe I taught you yesterday is for half as much

soup as you have here. You need to double the ingredients when you use a pot this big or else the soup is going to be too thin. Like so.”

“Indeed? I... I see.” Rys peered into the stockpot, staring at the soup. “I understand what I did wrong.” She was speaking quickly, like she was in a rush to leave. “I will return home immediately and adjust the proportions as you say.”

Japyona smiled at Rys’s strange behavior. “Miss Rys, would you at least consider staying for tea—oh?” When she looked up, she saw that Rys had vanished. She hurried out of the store, looking up and down the street, but Rys was nowhere to be seen. “That Rys...” she said. “Where did she vanish to? I don’t see any side streets she could have gone down.”

She tilted her head to the side, puzzled.

“I’m back!” Still in her half-lupine form, Rys said a hurried greeting as she rushed to the magic stove. She put the stockpot on the burner and set it to high, gathering seasonings from the shelf above her to add to the soup. “Two dashes of this... Three of that...” She glanced over at the notes she had taken in class, doubling the ingredients like Japyona had said. It was ready in no time. She dipped the ladle in, stirred, and once again took a sip. “Yes!” Satisfied, she ladled out the soup into the household’s bowls behind her.

“Hiya!” called Rys, “How’s the rest of our breakfast coming?”

“Everything is on the table, Mistress. Blossom brought in fresh vegetables as well; they have been arranged on a platter and brought into the living room.”

“Very good. Then all that’s left is to serve the soup. Let’s hurry!”

“Yes, Mistress.”

The two brought the bowls of soup into the living room, where Flio and the rest were already seated. “I apologize for the delay,” said Rys. “Here is today’s soup.” She went down the line, placing the bowls in front of her family. Across from her on the other side of the table, Hiya did the same. Rys went back into the kitchen to hang up her apron on a hook beside the door, and then took her seat next to Flio.

“Shall we, then?” said Flio once everyone was seated. He clapped his hands together and said, “Thank you for the food!”

“Thank you!” said the rest, also pressing their hands together and bowing slightly. Soon, everyone was busy eating.

Flio took a spoonful of the soup and looked over at his wife, beaming fondly. “This soup is new, isn’t it? I like it a lot.”

The soup was a big hit. After Flio spoke, the others tried theirs, and one by one offered words of praise.

“Oh! Now that you mention it, I’ve never seen this kind of soup before.”

“It’s good! I like soup with lots of vegetables.”

“Lady Rys’s cooking is always good.”

Rys smiled happily, but not even Flio noticed that she was pumping her fists in triumph under the table.



After eating, Flio went to the room he shared with Rys. There was a passage between his bedroom and the rest of the house, so that if he wanted, he could sneak into the bedroom without anyone noticing. Sitting in front of his desk, Flio removed a number of magic gems from his bag. He lined them up on the desk before him.

“I think I’ll create some enchanted rings today,” he said, taking out a metal plate. This plate had once been the poor-quality weapons he had been given when he left Klyrode Castle. Some time ago he had fused them together into a single piece. “Those weapons really were worthless,” he said, fondly remembering. “No respectable shopkeeper would take something like that.”

He used his magic, peeling off a portion of the metal like it was soft clay. Flio took it in his hands and imbued his fingers with magic, manipulating it dexterously. Before long, he had shaped the lump of metal into a ring. “Not bad,” he said. He carved intricate patterns around the ring’s head, taking breaks as he worked to see how it was coming. He nodded, satisfied.

Next, Flio picked up a magic gem and touched it with his index finger, pouring magic in directly. “I feel like I’ve more or less gotten the hang of this,” he said, nodding to himself as he chanted. Before long, the gem was imbued with two effects: a speed enchantment and a stamina enchantment. “And now,” he said, “for the finishing touch.” He set the gem into the head of the ring he had just created, and once again began to chant. There was a click, and the ring was finished.

Flio picked up the ring, looking it over from every angle. “Not bad,” he said again, satisfied. He kept working for a while, and before long he had created twenty rings.

Conventional wisdom was that for a gemcrafter to create a ring of this quality, it would take three days to complete the head and two days to enchant the gem itself. Flio, however, could do those five days of work in approximately three minutes.

Flio stashed his newly-forged rings in his bag. “I suppose I’ll head into town and sell these at the general store,” he said, and at that moment Rys came into the room. She met Flio’s gaze.

“Oh, were you about to go into town, my love?”

“Yeah, I was just getting ready,” Flio said.

“Then I suppose I shall get ready as well,” said Rys. “Would you wait a few moments?” She took her favorite white dress from the dresser and stripped out of the clothes she had been wearing to change into the dress.

Flio was openly staring at the sight of Rys in her undergarments. “Is something the matter?” she asked.

“N-No.” Flio blushed. “I was just... I was just admiring your beauty.”

“My lord!” Rys’s face turned as red as Flio’s. She brought her hand in front of her face, a little shy. But then she sidled up to him and sat down on his lap, hugging him tight and pulling him into a deep kiss. Flio returned her affection, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing back eagerly. For a while, the two simply stayed like that, bodies pressed together, lips touching lips. Then, they pulled apart.

“As much as I hate to end it there, we had best deal with your business first,” said Rys, wistful as she stood up from Flio’s lap.

“Yes, it’s still midday,” said Flio, taking to his feet as well. “We should take care of the day’s work.”

Flio and Rys left the house together, Rys holding Flio’s arm as always. “Houghtow is such a busy city,” she said as she looked around at their surroundings. True to her words, the streets were full of people going about their day. Everywhere they went they could hear some lively conversation.

“It is,” said Flio. “Houghtow’s a good bit o’ ways from Klyrode Castle, but that also means it hasn’t been targeted by the Dark One’s forces. It might be more prosperous than cities nearer to the castle now.” He took stock of his surroundings as he spoke. “Perhaps I’ll open my own shop here one of these days. I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Your own shop, my love?” said Rys. “I’m sure it would do well. If you do, I’ll have to tell some of my acquaintances to come visit.”

“Hold on, Rys!” Flio balked. “When you say ‘acquaintances,’ you mean people from the Dark Army, right? I mean, I’d be happy to have them, but wouldn’t having demons walking around the city make the humans panic?”

“I’ll be sure to tell them to disguise themselves as humans,” Rys said. “There shouldn’t be any need to worry.” She smiled and added, “You know, my dear husband... I would do anything for your sake. Anything at all. You need only order me.”

“Thank you, Rys,” he said. “I’ll be sure to keep that in mind when I need something.” He gently pressed his lips to her cheek, and Rys returned the gesture. “Ah, there are so many people here...”

“I understand, my lord.”

The two continued their whispered conversation until they finally reached the shop. "All right," said Flio. "I'll see about selling those rings."

"And I will go to the cooking school again," said Rys, bowing deeply. She had been attending classes in secret at first, but eventually she decided that it was an act of disobedience to keep secrets, and confessed. Flio, of course, was happy to give her permission. And so, she now studied cooking with her husband's blessing.

"Do you want to go out to eat again after I'm done?" asked Flio.

"Of course!" said Rys, bowing again. "I look forward to it!" She turned and headed off towards the school. She wore a bag over her shoulder, with parchment and a pen for taking notes in class.

Flio watched her go before heading into his usual general store. "Good luck at class," he said. "I'll do my best too at the sales talks!"



That night, Flio and Rys were together in bed. Rys laid her head on Flio's arm, her hand resting on his chest. "Today's dinner was amazing," said Flio. "Did you learn to make that minced meat dish in class today?"

"I did," Rys answered, rubbing her cheek against Flio's arm as she spoke. "It is called 'hamburger steak.' It's a way to make a good meal out of cheap meat. I was only testing out the recipe, but I'm glad it found favor with you." Flio hugged his wife tight. "Did you get a good price for those magic gems, my love?"

"I suppose," he said wryly. "I think I might have gone in a bit too hard bargaining, though. The shopkeeper looked like he was on the verge of tears." Rys chuckled.

"You know, my love," she said, after she had finished laughing, "the hamburger steak I prepared today is supposed to be quite popular with children." She blushed as she spoke, looking up at her husband.

"You don't say," said Flio, smiling as he moved to kiss Rys. "Then we'll just have to do our best to make one." Rys closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. As the two shared a lingering embrace, the magic lamp by their bedside went dark.

◇The Following Morning◇

Flio opened his eyes to see the morning light streaming in through the curtains. "Morning, huh?" he said. Rys was beside him, still snoring quietly in his arms. Flio looked over, taking in her sleeping face. Slowly, Rys opened her eyes as well.

"Good morning, my love," she said.

“Good morning, Rys.” The two kissed. “Clear sky today.”

“That’s good to hear. I need to launder the sheets, you know.” Rys stepped out of the bed as she spoke. She pulled on her clothes. “But first, I should get breakfast ready, shouldn’t I?”

“Would you like my help today?” said Flio.

“Oh, would you like to?”

“Of course! I’d hate to make you do *all* the cooking, Rys.”

“Then, my lord, I will trust myself to your capable hands,” said Rys, giggling.

“And I to yours!” said Flio. He couldn’t help giggling either.

Flio and Rys. They were born in different worlds, to different races, but they nonetheless remained very deeply in love.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this book! This was my third story, released online a year ago. It was my first story featuring an overpowered protagonist. I'm an old-fashioned type, so I had always thought that writing overpowered characters in an isekai story was a bit too convenient. But seeing how popular that sort of story was, I changed my mind and decided it might be fun to try writing my own story with a cheat-level protagonist. Through a number of twists and turns, it ended up published as a novel. This was really just a story where I just did whatever I felt like. There were times when I wondered if it was really okay to publish something like this, but in the end I'm happy for the chance to share Flio and all of the other colorful characters in this story with the world.

The web version continues quite a bit further past this point, but I suppose the novel version of Flio and friends are still continuing on their way. I hope you'll continue to read *Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers* as it continues, in light novel and web novel forms.

Finally, I'd like to give my deepest thanks to Katagiri-sama for the wonderful illustrations, to Overlap and everyone else for their efforts to get this book published, and to all of you who chose to read this.

Miya Kinojo, December 2016



Chillin' in Another World
with **LV 2**
SUPER CHEAT
POWERS

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



Uliminas

Balirossa

Gholl the Dark One/Ghosal

Banaza/Flio

Fenrys

Tsuya

The Golden-Haired Hero



We stayed up all night

“My Lord
Husband...”

Bonus Short Stories

The Love Life of the Dark One

◇Citadel of the Dark One—Throne Room◇

Uliminas, confederate of the Dark One, sat cross-legged on the floor, sorting through a veritable mountain of paperwork. “Don’t tell me the Dark Meown is visiting that human again,” she grumbled, clicking her tongue in annoyance.

After that human man, Flio, had destroyed the dragons under Uliminas’s command, the Dark One himself went to scout him out. Ever since then, he kept making frequent visits to Flio’s house under the pretext of persuading him to join their forces. At first Uliminas had approved of the idea, but as the Dark One began to spend as many as five or six days per week at Flio’s, it got to the point where she could no longer conceal her aggravation with his neglect of the Citadel’s affairs.

“We’re supposed to be at war with the humans! What is Lord Gholl thinking, visiting him meowll the time like that?” Uliminas chewed on her claws as she organized Gholl’s forgotten paperwork. “*Somemeown* needs to take a look at all this...”

While Uliminas was in the middle of all this, Yorminyt the Serpent Princess of the Infernal Four slithered into the throne room on her snake-like lower body. “Oh?” she said. “Isss the Dark One out today?”

“He...” started Uliminas, faltering, “He’s out purrforming some reconnaissance.”

“Again?”

“Yes, again!” Uliminas snapped. “Got a purroblem with it?!”

Yorminyt chuckled. “Not essspecially,” she said as she produced an enormous quantity of paperwork from her Bottomless Bag. “Please have these done quickly. These are requisissition forms for materials and funds that my forcesss need for our new deployment.”

She tossed the bundle of papers on the floor in front of where Uliminas was sitting. It landed with a thud. And with that, she left.

“Meooooowl!” Uliminas clawed at her face, and screamed.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Another day arrived, and once again Gholl left to pay Flio a visit.

This time, Uliminas followed after him. She took every caution, using every concealment spell she knew, and hid behind a tree near Flio's house to observe them. Through the window, she could see Gholl in his disguised form chatting with Flio. They looked for all the world like old friends.

Purrhaps he's trying to befriend that man in order to earn his allegiance... Uliminas mused. Makes sense I guess. She tilted her head. There was a woman sitting next to Gholl: Balirossa, the knight freeloading at Flio's house. *That woman... Uliminas felt nervous sweat running down her brow as she took another look. Noble bearing, wavy hair, ample breasts... She definitely looks like Lord Gholl's type!*

As the confederate of the Dark One, Uliminas knew everything there was to know about Gholl, including his taste in women. She kept her eyes on Balirossa. *Don't tell me...is Lord Gholl coming here to see her?!* She swallowed.

◇Citadel of the Dark One—Throne Room◇

"I'm back," said Gholl. It was quite late by the time he showed up. Uliminas bowed deeply as Gholl strode to the throne. "It's good to see mew, Lord Gholl."

Gholl raised his hand in a casual greeting as he sat down. "Did anything happen while I was away?" he asked.

"Her Ladyship Yorminyt the Serpent Princess is waiting for mew to look over some papurrwork about her new deployment." Uliminas withdrew a tremendous volume of papers from her Bottomless Bag as she answered. Gholl spared them a single glance before turning back to Uliminas.

"Have you reviewed the forms yet?"

"Yes, Dark Meown."

"I see. Then tell Yorminyt that I approve her request."

"Mew?"

"If you've looked it over, there shouldn't be an issue. I'll get the details later."

"Y-Yes, Dark Meown. It shall be done."

"Was that all?" asked Gholl.

"That's the only thing that stands meowt," said Uliminas. "I've already taken care of the rest."

"I see." Gholl rose from his throne. *I-If I'm going to ask about that woman, Uliminas thought, then this is my meownly chance...*

"Um, excuse me, Lord Gholl?" she said, faltering as she lifted her head to look at him. "It's nothing impurrtant, but I have a question..."

Suddenly, Gholl picked up the Hellcat, holding her in his arms. "If you want to talk," he said, "let's do it in bed."

"M-Meow?!" Uliminas, flustered, went red as Gholl cradled her in

his arms. “Lord Gholl? Wh-What?”

“I’m asking you to attend to me tonight,” he said. “Do you not want to? I can find somebody else...”

“No!” she blurted out. “No, I’d be purrfectly happy to!” She wrapped her arms around the Dark One’s shoulders. *It’s been so long since he’s asked that of me...*

An expression of delight came over Uliminas’s face.

◇Bedchambers of the Dark One—Later◇

Uliminas was dozing off on Gholl’s bed, her arms and legs spread out wide. “I’m so...so happy,” she mumbled, slightly incoherent. “Mewww...” Her body twitched.

Gholl pulled the sheets over Uliminas’s naked body. “Hrm. It’s been a while since we’ve done this. I hope I wasn’t too rough,” he said as he lay down next to her. “So...what was it you wanted to talk about, earlier?”

Uliminas didn’t respond. She had fallen asleep. “Hrm,” said Gholl. “Tomorrow, then.”

He rested his head on Uliminas’s arm. As he did, the Hellcat shifted in her sleep to wrap herself around Gholl’s body. Gholl took a good long look at her face. “Adorable...” he said. “You’re so cute sometimes, Uliminas.”

He gently stroked her hair, lost in thought. “But that woman, Balirossa...” Images of Balirossa from his day at Flio’s house played in his mind as he stared at the ceiling.

He didn’t notice the scowl on Uliminas’s face as she listened to those words.

Tsuya and the Golden-Haired Hero

One day, several months after the Golden-Haired Hero had been brought to this world, the Hero took a company of knights with him and headed out to train in the southern forest. He sat astride his white horse, looking in disbelief at the two giant goblins coming straight at him.

“What?!” he bellowed. “That didn’t force them back?!” His heavy knights had put everything into their attack, but the goblins simply plowed through them, tossing them aside with both arms as they continued to advance.

“Useless!” He exhaled sharply.

The Hero’s knights gathered around him. “Lord Hero!” said the leader. “Leave this to your personal guard!”

At his command, the knights charged at the goblins. For a second it looked like the goblins were going to bowl them over like they had

the heavy knights, but these guards were no common soldiers. They held firm.

“That all you got?!” shouted their leader.

“Archers!” the Hero called. “Now!” Behind him, his archers unleashed a fierce volley of arrows.

“Lord Hero! Wait!” shouted the knights’ leader, but it was too late. The arrows rained down not on the giant goblins, but the Hero’s personal guard. Suddenly, the knights found themselves under attack from both their front and their rear!

“I-Idiots!” shouted the Hero. “Who told you to aim at my guards?!”

“But, My Lord!” shouted one of the archers. “They’re the only ones we can hit from here! What else were we supposed to do?!”

The Hero grit his teeth. “So my orders were wrong?! Is it my fault you’re such lousy archers?!”

“N-No!” said the archer, “Of... Of course not!” The archers were all in disarray.

The Hero did not stop castigating them for some time.

◇Castle Klyrode◇

“I’m back...” The Hero mumbled as he stepped into his lavish quarters.

The voices of many girls rang out to greet him. “Welcome home!”

These were the girls King Klyrode had assigned to attend to the Hero’s needs. They ran up to him and busied themselves with helping him out of his armor, the Golden-Haired Hero standing still as they stripped him and wiped away his sweat with cloth. They then dressed him in extravagant daywear.

“You must have had a long day,” said one of the women.

“What magnificent deeds did you perform?” asked another. “Tell us!”

But the Hero kept quiet, only sighing in irritation.

All these girls do is fawn over me, he thought. *What I wouldn’t give to be alone with my thoughts.* He raised his head to look at the servient girls as one woman interposed herself between him and the rest. She smiled indulgently at her companions.

“All right, all right~!” she said. “It’s important to keep His Lordship company, but right now he’s tired,” she said, herding them back out of the room. “Let’s leave him to rest~!”

“I-Is that true? Do you want us to leave you alone, my Lord Hero?” asked another, dissatisfied with being pushed out of the room.

“Erm,” the Hero said. “Well, yes, I suppose...”

“Well,” said the girl, “if Your Lordship says so...” she followed the rest out with an air of great reluctance.

“Hold on!” the Hero stopped the last girl before she left—the girl who had told the rest to leave him alone.

“Me~?” she said, startled, pointing a finger to her own face.

“Yeah. You may stay.”

“I may?”

“You may. Just you,” the Hero said. Nervously, the girl walked back to his side. “How could you tell I was tired?”

The girl touched her index finger to her lower lip, pondering the Hero’s question. And then, she clapped her hands in realization. “Oh!” she said. “I know! I could just tell~!”

“What?” The Hero was dumbfounded by her answer.

She smiled mischievously. “Yes, I could just tell you were tired~!”

The Hero grimaced. “You could just tell...so you sent the other girls away?”

“Yes~!” she said, playfully sticking out her tongue. “I suppose I did!”

“You’re a strange one, aren’t you...” the Hero sat down heavily, still frustrated from his day. He held out his empty glass. “I want you to wait on me by yourself today. All right?”

“Yes, my Lord Hero~!” she said. “This is quite the honor.” She bowed deeply, then hurried to a corner of the room where she retrieved a bottle of liqueur to bring back to the Hero.

“What should I call you?” the Hero asked as the girl began to fill his glass.

“Oh!” the girl smiled wide at the question. “My name is Tsuyaaa!”

“Tsuya...” he brought the near-overflowing cup to his lips and drained it in a single gulp. “All right then, Tsuya,” he said. “I want you to be my attendant from now on.”

“I-I’m sorry?” Tsuya looked bewildered. “You want...someone like me? I’m from a poor family, you know. Lots and lots of the other girls are nobility, or daughters of someone important... Wouldn’t you rather have them?”

The Golden-Haired Hero held up his empty glass again. “I don’t care about any of that,” he said. “I like you.”

Tsuya stiffened her lips at his words. “Y-Yes sir, my Lord Hero~!” she said. “If that is your will, I will wait on you for everything I’m worth!” As she was speaking, she forgot to stop pouring the liquor. It spilled over the sides of the glass, getting all over the Golden-Haired Hero’s hand.

“Oh no!” she cried. “I’m so sorry for the mess!” Panicking, she wiped his hand dry with the hem of her skirt. Tsuya had been wearing a short skirt to begin with, and when she pulled it up to use as an impromptu towel she inadvertently gave the Hero a direct view of her undergarments.

“M-My Lord Hero?” she asked. “What’s the matter?” She had no idea that he was staring.

“N-Nothing,” he said, stealing another glance up her skirt. Oblivious, Tsuya continued to wipe clean his hand.

The Melancholy Princess

◇Castle Klyrode—Throne Room◇

The Princess sighed deeply. Just yesterday the castle had been wrecked by the Archmage of Midnight, Damalynas the Apricot, and the repairs were not proceeding as fast as they should. *It’s not surprising*, she thought, sighing again. *After all, half of our mages and witches still have yet to recover...*

Damalynas had destroyed nearly half of the castle’s territory, and the princess considered it urgent to repair the castle before the Dark Army came to attack again. However, the Purification spell they had used to repel the Dark One previously had cost them most of their magic users skilled enough to move large building materials with sorcery. More than half of the spellcasters in the castle were still recovering from magic exhaustion. Her father, King Klyrode, was among them. Therefore the Princess, as the next in line for the throne, was appointed reagent and took command of Klyrode’s forces. At the present moment, she was sitting on the throne, massaging her temples.

“Your Highness.” The knight Boralis stepped into the throne room, clad in armor. Boralis was the commander of the all-female company of knights that served as the Princess’s personal guards. She had just returned from her inspection of the city and the nearby strongholds.

“Boralis,” said the Princess. “How fares the city?”

“Thankfully, the people are not panicking as much as we feared. The situation in the strongholds, however, is dire.”

“The fortresses?”

“Yes, Your Highness. It seems the news that the Archmage of Midnight had destroyed the castle shook our soldiers. There were many deserters, especially from the Northern Stronghold, which is closest to the Dark Army.”

The Princess took to her feet with no hesitation. “Let us go at once to the Northern Stronghold. I must tell them that the Archmage of Midnight is no longer a threat. Perhaps that will quell their worries.”

“Th-There is no need for you to go yourself, Your Highness,” said Boralis, looking up at her Princess with concern. “You need only order me, and I will see that they receive your message. The Northern Stronghold is very close to the Dark Citadel... I would not wish to

expose you to such danger.”

“But the danger is *why* I must go myself,” the Princess answered. “Those soldiers must be on constant guard against the Dark Army. How can I hope to raise their morale if I do not speak to them, show my sympathy, and give words of encouragement?”

She walked briskly towards the door as she continued. “I shall change into more appropriate clothes. Boralis, assemble your knights and await me at the castle gates.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Boralis bowed her head and swiftly exited the room. The Princess watched her go out of the corner of her eye as she went to her own chambers.

◇The Princess’s Chambers◇

For the daughter of a king, the Princess’s chambers were surprisingly small and cozy. If you hadn’t known that they belonged to royalty, you would be forgiven for assuming that they belonged to a high-ranking mage or someone similar. They were divided into two rooms: one for receiving guests, and the other serving as both bedroom and closet. The Princess was certainly entitled to grander chambers, but she chose to live here willingly.

“We are under attack by the Dark Army,” she reasoned. “This is not the time for personal indulgence.”

The Princess frowned and crossed her arms as she regarded the outfits hanging on the walls of her room. *None of these are really suited for paying an official visit*, she thought. *I need something more... “majestic,” or “dignified.”* Most of the space was taken up by outfits she had worn during her time in school, with only a few token formal dresses for entertaining guests or participating in banquets.

The Princess weighed the matter in her head. “No,” she said aloud as she reached out to grab a simple traveler’s outfit. “My clothes are not what matters. What my kingdom needs from me now is not frippery.” She put on the clothes and tied her long hair back in a ponytail.

The Princess was an attractive woman, but she preferred to go without ornamentation. She would refuse any invitation to a banquet or a dance, even from princes or noble heirs or children of emperors, always saying, “Not in these uncertain times, with the Dark Army at our gates...” She was nearly thirty, but still unmarried. She had never even taken a lover.

“Not that it bothers me,” she muttered to herself as she applied makeup, staring at her face reflected in the large mirror. “It doesn’t matter if I never marry, as long as my kingdom...as long as my people are safe.”

Later, the Princess met Boralis and her knights at the gate and left for the Northern Stronghold under their protection. The soldiers were truly moved by the unexpected royal visit. “I can’t believe it...the Princess herself...” said one.

“We *never* saw the king when *he* was in charge,” said another. “What a blessing...”

The Princess smiled, and one by one took each of the soldiers’ hands in her own. “It is thanks to you that Klyrode is at peace,” she said. “I am truly, truly grateful.” By the time she left, the gloomy atmosphere in the fortress was entirely dispelled.

◇The Princess’s Chambers—That Night◇

The knight Boralis delivered her report, wrapping up matters as the Princess listened with a soft smile. “Finally,” said Boralis. “It would seem your visit to the Northern Stronghold had the desired effect. Morale has greatly improved, and we’ve even received reports that some of the deserters have returned to their posts.”

“I see. I’m so glad...”

“It’s all because of Your Highness’s decisive action. You were correct to visit yourself.” Boralis bowed deeply.

“They have a very difficult job, those soldiers,” said the Princess. “All I did was speak to them.” She reached out and held Boralis’s hand. “Your job is difficult as well,” she said. “I’m very sorry for all of the hardships you have suffered in my name.”

Tears welled up in the corners of the knight’s eyes. “You... You are too kind...to say such things...”

“I am only saying what I feel,” the Princess said. “If I didn’t have you by my side, I could never do things like paying visits to strongholds.”

It took all of Boralis’s willpower to stop herself from crying.



Boralis left the room, and the Princess collapsed onto her bed. *I’m so tired...*

She sighed and turned her head to look at her desk—while she had been out visiting the Northern Stronghold, it had amassed a truly daunting pile of paperwork. “But no matter how tired I am...I need to look those papers over before tomorrow...”

She sighed again as she forced herself out of bed and trudged forwards. “Oh, when shall my prince come for me...?”

Some time after the destruction of Damalynas the Archmage of Midnight, Blossom gradually roused herself in her dimly lit room one morning.

“Mmf...” she mumbled while yawning. “Guess it’s time to wake up...”

Stark naked, she pulled herself out of bed. Blossom didn’t have many worldly possessions. Her room gave no indication that it belonged to a young lady. There was neither a hand mirror nor a single case of makeup.

“Another big day today,” she said, retrieving the clothes she had casually tossed onto her chair.

She moved slowly through the hallway, careful not to wake the others, and went down the stairs. Sybe, in its unicorn rabbit form, was sleeping in its hutch in the living room. When Blossom reached the foot of the stairs, Sybe started awake and began snuffling, its ears perking up. It bounded over to her on two legs, as was its habit from when it had been a psychobear.

“Good morning, Sybe,” said Blossom, grinning at the sight. “Hope today finds you well.” Sybe followed her out of the house, but Blossom stopped short as she stepped outside.

“What, again?” she said. Near the house was the charred-black corpse of a psychobear.

Flio had cast a magic barrier around the house to stop any wild beasts from getting in and had placed a lightning trap to keep them from trying fruitlessly to destroy the barrier. When Sybe noticed the dead psychobear outside, it transformed back into its original form. It then took the cart from the side of the house, dragged it over to the corpse, and loaded it on.

“I’ll go on ahead, Sybe,” said Blossom. She started to walk in the direction of the garden.

Sybe responded with a “Gwaor!” and began pulling the cart back to the side of the house.

“All right,” said Blossom as she retrieved the hoe from her magic bag and began to cultivate the field. “Let’s do this!”

Although she had served the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode as a heavy knight, Blossom was originally from a farming family. She just so happened to be quite a bit better at farming than soldiering. She cried out as she brought the hoe down, sinking its blade into the earth, and pulled it back up with all her strength.

“This really is a good hoe that Lord Flio made,” she said, smiling as she examined the tool. “It makes working a big garden like this feel like nothing!”

At a glance it looked like an ordinary hoe, but in fact the blade

was made not of steel but dragon scale. It was one of the custom items Flio had made from the scales he'd retrieved from the dragons the Dark One had sent to attack him. Dragon scale was an incredibly expensive material, prized for its hardness. Armor made of dragon scale was some of the best in the world. Blossom was the only human alive who had farming tools made of such a valuable material, but Flio showed no sign of realizing the absurdity of the situation.

Blossom was humming a tune as she worked when Sybe came over from the direction of the house, pulling another cart. This one was full of baskets.

"Well, if it isn't Sybe!" Blossom struck the hoe into the ground and left it standing upright as she walked over to her companion. "Sybe, leave the cart there and grab one of those baskets."

"Gworf!" Together, Blossom and Sybe went to the lush plot of vegetables to the side of the field she had been working in.

"Right, listen up," said Blossom. "I want you to pull up anything that's gone yellow near the root. If they're still green, that means they aren't ready yet, so don't pull those ones."

"Gwuf!" Sybe cried, again, and nodded its head. Sybe bent its large body down, pulling the leaves aside to check the roots of the plants. One of them was yellow near the root, so Sybe gripped it in its powerful paws and pulled it out in a single go. All along the roots were a great number of large round tubers.

"Pretty big, aren't they?" said Blossom. "Those are potalpoes! There's probably still some left in the ground, so let's see if we can dig any more up."

"Gwowor!" Sybe nodded again and pulled the tubers off of the potalpo root, tossing them into the basket. The two of them dug around in the area where the root had been, until they had properly harvested all of the potalpoes.

"We got another big harvest, Sybe!"

"Gwor!"

Blossom and Sybe both smiled as they looked at all of the full baskets. Sybe cried out happily. After a while, Blossom turned to look in the direction of the mountains. "It's about time for Lady Rys to start making breakfast. Do you wanna go bring our fresh-picked veggies back to the house?"

She began to walk, and Sybe followed after her, making cute cries and pulling the cart. The cart was full of heavy baskets now, but Sybe pulled it along as if it were as light as a feather.

One one side was a former knight of Castle Klyrode, and on the other, a psychobear—a beast that struck fear into the hearts of men. They hurried along towards the house, enjoying each other's

company.

◇Flio's House—Living Room◇

Sybe, still in its psychobear form, napped next to its hutch. It had eaten to its heart's content, and was now on its back, snoring peacefully. Blossom lay facedown on Sybe's stomach, sleeping just as deeply as the psychobear. Every now and then she would mutter something in her sleep.

Rys gave the two a wry look. "Goodness. It's well into the morning, you know."

"Let them sleep," said Flio. "They were up early working in the garden."

Rys looked satisfied by Flio's words. "I suppose you're right," she said.

"Sybe..." murmured Blossom between her snores. "Look, a big potalpo..." As she spoke, she rubbed her cheek against Sybe's fluffy belly.

Sybe held Blossom gently in its arms. "Gwoor..."

Flio and Rys fondly watched them sleep.

Yes, Miss Belano!

◇Houghtow College of Magic◇

"Now, let's try putting those principles into practice!" Oryou, a teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic, finished writing on the blackboard and led the students of her offensive magic course out of the classroom. Oryou was from the Land of the Rising Sun, far to the east, and wore what she called a "kimono," an item of clothing unique to her homeland. Her hair was done up with an ornament she called a "kanzashi," exposing the nape of her elegant and feminine neck.

Among the line of students that followed her out of the room was Belano. Belano had once been a witch working for the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and had set out with the Golden-Haired Hero to fight the Dark Army, but through a number of twists and turns she had ended up leaving the kingdom's employ, and now attended the College of Magic as a private individual while living at Flio's house. Belano could hardly use any offensive magic and had been studying as hard as she could to change that, and also to not disappoint Flio after he had paid her tuition. (You can read more about this in the main story.)

Belano clenched her right hand tight as she followed after Oryou. On her fingers were a number of rings given to her by Flio. These

rings were set with magic gems and were meant to supplement her magic points. In addition to her inability to use offensive magic, Belano was born with an unusually low level of magic points. She would suffer from magic exhaustion after using only a few defensive or recovery spells. Moreover, she had a bad habit of vomiting and fainting when this happened as well. Each one of the rings Flio had given her held a hundred times the magic points in her body.

If only I had as much magic as one of these rings, she thought, sighing as Oryou led them into another classroom. *No... Even one-tenth as much as one would be enough.*

The room they had entered was used for practical magic exercises. It was enchanted so that within the boundaries of the room, students could practice their spells to their heart's content without inflicting damage.

"Shall we get started?" said Oryou.

Belano nodded her head with surprising force.

"Oh, you seem eager, Belano! Why don't you go first, then?"

Oryou pointed at Belano as she spoke.

"Hwah?!" Belano gasped, looking very small as she stepped out from the crowd of students.

"Listen up, Belano," said Oryou, pointing her to a part of the room where a number of wooden posts were stuck in the ground at regular intervals. "Today, you will be practicing the spell Firelance. Aim it at one of those posts."

Belano took a deep breath as she fixed her vision on a post. She held out her right hand, and began to chant.

"...Firelance." A small ball of fire appeared above her head. It floated silently, looking more like a will-o-wisp than a lance. "...Go!" she said, glancing at the ball.

At her words, the will-o'-wisp floated listlessly through the air and struck the post with a weak "plop." It then broke into four parts and vanished.

Belano could hear the other students talking behind her back as they watched her performance.

"Was that a Firelance?" questioned one.

"Was it?" came another. "That didn't look right at all..."

"Is that really the best she can do?"

But Belano smiled, a satisfied look on her face. "I did it..." she said. "I finally managed to hit the target..."

Oryou's shoulders slumped. *That's right...* she thought, forcing herself to smile as Belano celebrated her small victory. *She never has managed to hit the target before, has she...?* "Now! Next, Shion!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Shion, a male student, moved up from behind

Belano. He also took a deep breath and began to chant. *If I can follow up that shoddy spell with a good one, it might earn me some points with the teacher.* He licked his lips and held up his right arm as five proper Firelances appeared above his head, right on queue.

The students began to stir at the display.

“Wow, Shion! The most I can do is three!”

“Big ones too...”

Shion grinned in triumph. “Now, go!” He swung his arm downwards while aiming at the posts, and the lances began to move. But they didn’t go straight. They streaked off wildly in every direction, flying this way and that.

“Oh, no...” said Shion, dismayed that his attempt to show off had gone so badly. “What do I do?” He began chanting again, but it was no use. The Firelances were completely out of his control.

“Well, *this* is a mess!” Oryou clicked her tongue in frustration and held both her arms up. She tried to strike the lances out of the air with the spell Shatter, but they were moving far too fast and randomly for her to hit. Suddenly, two of them changed their course in midair, heading straight for the students.

“No!” She chanted as fast as she could, but the Firelances were faster. Before her eyes, they rained down on her class.

Claaang!

Oryou was stunned into silence by the noise. No student could handle a Firelance coming at them with some force...or so she had thought. But a giant magic shield had appeared and stopped the Firelances, which dispersed harmlessly. Behind the shield stood Belano.

“B-Belano...Was that *your* shield?” Oryou couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

Belano blushed, just a little. “W-Well,” she said. “I’m a defensive...a defensive magic specialist...” She scratched nervously at her cheek.

◇Flio’s House◇

Flio was there to greet Belano when she got home from school. “Welcome home, Belano!”

But Belano looked somehow dazed as she walked into the house. Something seemed off about her, and Flio was worried.

“What’s wrong?” Flio asked. “Did something happen at school?”

“Um...” Belano bit her lower lip. “Well, something, I guess...” she said. “They asked me if I could teach defensive magic at the college...”

“What?! Hold on, Belano. Aren’t you going there to study?”

“Y-Yes,” she said. “Yes, I am...”

Flio and Belano stared at each other, both at a loss.

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by Miya Kinojo

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